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KANSAS KITTEN THE NORTH WEST DETECTIVE



OR,

Yank Yellowbird's Search-Brigade.

A Romance of Southern Montana.

BY WM. H. MANNING,
AUTHOR OF "WILD WEST WALT," "THE DUKE
OF DAKOTA," "YANK YELLOWBIRD,"
"GOLD GAUNTLET," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I. THE LIFE-HUNTER.

A KNIFE flashed in the firelight.
It was only a little ray, for the night camp-
fire had burned low, but it sufficed to show the
sinister-looking person who was glaring upon
the two men who slept under the huge forest
tree.

Inch by inch he had crept toward them, drag-
ging his heavy form over the leaves and twigs
with surprising skill, and holding an ugly-look-
ing knife between his teeth.

He was now so near that the crisis was not

"MAOW! PERHAPS YOU KIN TAKE KANSAS KITTEN NOW. MA-YOW-YOW-YOW!"

far distant, and he grimly shifted the knife to his muscular right hand, while the fading light of the fire caught the side of the blade and sent out a flash as though to warn the sleepers.

Evidently, warning was necessary.

Murder was in the heart of the creeping man. He knew the men by the fire, and it was his deliberate purpose to kill one of them.

The spot was the heart of a forest of the Northwest. Mile after mile it extended, one extremity approaching the foot of the Rocky Mountain chain like a devotee kneeling to an august power. In the forest, too, lurked every species of savage animal known to the Northwest, and not a few savage men. It was a place which the weak and timid might well avoid, but the stout-hearted lover of Nature could find no more pleasant resort.

The man with the knife crept on. He could no longer keep himself concealed, for the fire-light fell upon him, but he trusted to stealth and caution. The man by the fire did not stir; it would be only the work of a few moments, he believed, to reach them and drive his knife home.

He could see their faces dimly. One was a young man with a face smoothly-shaven except for the heavy mustache which almost concealed his mouth. The prowler cared nothing for this man. It was the second camper—he of the bearded face—who was in danger.

Nearer went the would-be assassin. Only a few feet separated him from his victim. Tighter was the knife grasped; feverishly gleamed its owner's eyes.

The crisis was at hand, and the campers still slept.

Suddenly the silence was broken. The howl of a dog arose lugubriously only a few feet away. The sound had a magical effect. The bearded man started to his elbow.

The assassin uttered a furious exclamation and sprang forward, his knife uplifted, but there was a sudden report, clearly that of a revolver, and the prowler dropped like a stone to the ground.

In an instant all was confusion. The bearded man squirmed backward in snake-like style, and, raising a long rifle, crouched in the shadows with his back to a tree; a lank, ill-looking dog dashed into camp with another mournful howl; while the younger of the late sleepers leaped to his feet, rifle in hand, his keen, bold eyes shooting a steady, investigating glance around.

"Down, lad!" exclaimed he of the beard. "Thar may be more o' the egregious varmints about!"

The dog had run to the side of the fallen man, and now began to pass his tongue caressingly over one the brown hands visible to him. But the man started up with a fierce imprecation.

"Curse you!" he hoarsely gasped, "I owe all this ter you. Why couldn't ye keep yer blamed howlin' still? Take that!"

His hand had feebly sought his belt; he lifted it, holding a revolver, and fired at the dog; and the animal uttered another howl and hastened off. The weapon was raised for a second shot, but, before it could be fired, it was wrenched away by the bearded man.

"Don't vent yer spite on the dumb creetur', ye atrocious insex!" was the stern command.

The baffled assassin looked up with dull eyes. "You've done fur me, Yank Yellowbird!" he gasped.

"Your own pervarted heart has done fur ye," gravely answered the bearded man. "When I fired I hadn't no idee 'twas a man—I hadn't, by hurley! I heard a howl; I see'd you, an' thought 'twas an egregious wolf. Still, afore I shed any tears, I'd like ter know why you was goin' ter drive that long knife inter my physikal person. The Yellowbirds are a forgivin' race, but they never took kindly ter bein' carved up like Christmas turkeys."

"Only fur the dog I'd had ye."

"I thank the dog; I sartainly do," responded Yank Yellowbird, soberly.

"The hand of Providence seems to be visible in this," added the third man, who had thus far maintained silence. "If, as I understand it, the dog belonged to this baffled murderer, his own companion appeared to thwart his evil intentions."

"You spin it off like a professor!" sneered the ruffian. "Wal, I don't mind sayin' the dog was mine, and—"

He paused, and an expression of sharp pain passed over his face.

"I'm about gone!" he gasped.

"We'll look at the hurt," said Yank. "Bear a hand, Laramie Luke, an' mebbe we kin save him yit."

"Let me alone!" was the savage reply of the wounded man. "I'm no fool, an' I know the cursed bullet is in my vitals. Death is nigh, an' I won't be fumbled over. Yes, I'm a gone man, an' I ain't done my work; but you ain't clear yit, Yank Yellowbird."

"Clear o' what?"

"The hand o' death."

"Bein' mortal, I consait I ain't clear on't."

"Thar are others left, an' they'll do what I failed in."

"Kill me?"

"Yes."

"Land o' Goshen! why should anybody keer ter kill me?" was the surprised question.

"Oh! don't you try ter pose as a cherub. You're wal knowed in the West, an' wal hated. As a scout, trapper an' mountaineer you're some guns—the Injuns call ye Nevermiss—an' ef you'd stick ter that, you'd be all right. But ye won't; ye go prowlin' around, pokin' yer nose inter other folks' biz, an' you're bound ter git laid out. Your day is nigh."

"I've heard talk like this afore," Yank admitted, "but always from some mean skunk whose toes I'd trod on by bafflin' him in some atrocious villainy. Don't s'pose it's that way now, is it?"

"Don't you think ye hev only one man ter fight," returned the dying man, hoarsely, and without direct reply to what Yank had said. "Thar are many; enough ter beat you and avenge my death. They sent me, an' they'll send more."

"To be sure—to be sure. But I ain't an artom o' idee what all this is about. Why do they want ter kill me?"

"So you won't git the Buried Treasure."

"Hullo!" quoth the mountaineer, thoughtfully stroking his beard.

"You can't have it."

The would-be assassin made the assertion feebly, and it was plain that his sands of life were about run out.

"Others want it, do they?" asked Yank.

"Yes."

"Then I don't see but it's an even race 'twixt them an' me."

"You will lose. They are in dead earnest, and they are many. You are only one. They will beat you off; they will kill you. They fear your sharp, pryin' eyes, an' the best way ter beat ye is ter silence you. They sent me ter do the job, but the cussed dog howled, and I failed. But others will come; they've sworn ter kill ye; an' they are too many ter be evaded. They'll find an' kill ye!"

Only determined effort carried the man through this long speech, and at its close he seemed to lose the last vestige of his strength.

"Who be these men?" asked Yank. "I'd like ter know 'em when I see the critters."

The dying man's eyes unclosed.

"Don't trouble yerself ter hunt fur them," he faintly whispered. "Don't be afeard—they'll find you!"

An exultant smile passed over the man's face, but it suddenly faded. A shiver passed over his frame, and his eyelids once more fell.

"He is dead," said Laramie Luke.

"Right you are, lad; right you are. His lips never'll tell the secret I asked fur."

"All that he said was an enigma to me. What is this Buried Treasure of which he spoke?"

Yank's gaze was lifted to his friend's face; it dwelt there meditatively for a moment; and then he answered:

"You an' I ain't knowed each other a great while, Luke, but we've sorter got along wal tergeth, an' I don't mind answerin' ter ther p'int, especially as 'most every body else is in the secret."

"Believe me, I will betray no confidence you place in me," the young man answered.

"To be sure. Wal, the Buried Treasure is an egregious heap o' money buried by two men som'ers nigh Black Rock Bend. Neither on 'em lived ter git out o' the woods, an' their secret died with them. A sartain man knowed as Powderfoot, the Pathfinder, had the only clew, an' all his efforts hev been in vain; he can't find the Buried Treasure. Now, one o' the original owners has a darter at Black Rock Bend—Mary Sherwin, is her name—an' as she is a right nice little woman, I'm tryin' ter git the money fur her—but it's a blind trail; it is, by hurley!"

"I judge there are others who want to find it."

"I consait so. This dead man did; his survivin' partners do."

"You have no idea who they are?"

"Not an artom."

"But why do they hate you so bitterly?"

"I consait thar is only one reason—they're afeard I'll beat 'em out. I'll tell ye more about the Buried Treasure, bime-by."

"Is this Mary Sherwin young?"

"Young an' pooty. You'll find it interestin' ter meet her when we git ter Black Rock Bend. Thar is other folks thar o' the same sort. The town never'd b'en thar ef Albert Brandreth hadn't started his missionary school, an' the Mission is the big gun o' the town. Brandreth an' his wife are honest, deservin' folks. Then thar is their assistant superintendent, Joe Maynard. Can't say I think so wal o' him. Powderfoot, the Pathfinder, is an old borderer who's retired from actyve life, as 'twere. Then thar is his darter, Nell. She an' Mary Sherwin are teachers in the Mission."

"I anticipate considerable pleasure in visiting Black Rock Bend. There is a certain charm about such a town. Situated in the heart of the wilderness, built merely to do good to ignorant men and women, red and white, the Bend has a fascination for me."

Yank smiled grimly.

"It may hev deeper fas'nations afore you've b'en thar a week. Mary an' Nell are as pooty gals as you kin find anywhar—they be, by hurley! I wouldn't blame any man fur fallin' in love with 'em. I'd do it, myself, but I'm gittin' along in the shere an' yaller leaf, as the sayin' goes, an', besides, thar's no use o' my enterin' the matrimonial race while I'm so a'dicted with the newrolgy. I do hev the newrolgy egregious, stranger. I hev it at times so that I groan as loud as a buffler-bull can beller. Painful malady, but it ain't ketchin'. It's a trait o' the Yellowbird famly that they kin ketch all prev'lent epidemics, contagious an' chronic dispensations, but, once they git 'em, they hang on like hurley, an' nobody kin git 'em away."

The speaker shook his head, gravely, and then, laying his hand upon the dead assassin, suddenly added:

"S'pose we s'arch this man. Thar may be some sign ter explain his malevolent attack."

CHAPTER II.

TROUBLE ON THE RIVER.

LARAMIE LUKE nodded quickly.

"A good idea," he replied. "I was about to suggest the same thing. The dead man was a low, brutal ruffian, and one not likely to be given to much letter-writing, but a clew to his identity may be found. Let us look."

Yank knelt down and searched the unknown's pockets. There was nothing there to reveal his identity; not a scrap of paper was found. An empty whisky flask, several pieces of tobacco, and some other minor articles, were all that was found.

Luke, however, noticed that on each of the brown hands was an anchor marked in blue ink. This led him to search the man's arm. On one was found the image of a ship; on the other was the word "Joe," followed by a cross.

It was only a surmise, but Yank and Luke agreed that in most probability the man had been named Joe Cross. It was the only light they could obtain.

When their search was finished they noticed that the dog had returned and was standing a few feet away, looking at them doubtfully, and clearly prepared for flight, if such a course became necessary.

He was pre-eminently a homely animal. His frame was large, but the parts were unsymmetrical and loosely put together. He was gaunt and ill-favored in every way, his color being an unbecoming brown, while his head was clumsy of shape, and, with the sole exception of his eyes, aggressive of appearance. The eyes, however, looked mild and almost beseeching.

"Poor varmint!" quoth the mountaineer. "He's an or'fin now, fur he's bereft o' his master, though I can't b'lieve 'twas any great loss. Look at the bloody streak on the dog's shoulder. Close call fur him. Luke, the howl o' that dog did us good sarvice, an' I reelly feel a feller feelin' fur him. Mister Dog, come hyar. Good feller! Good dog!"

Yank held out his hand, and the dog's tail began to vibrate, while his homely face lighted up with a look which changed its whole expression. The mountaineer spoke again, and the animal came quickly forward. Ugly he was of appearance, but kind words went to his dog heart.

The man bent and caressed the shaggy head.

"He's no fool, nor no villain. Thar's brains in his head, an' gratitude, too. Wouldn't be a' tall s'prised ef he a'proves o' what we've done; yit, dog-like, he'd foller that assassin because 'twas his duty. Dogs don't need no preachers, nor churches, ter make 'em do their duty. In that they beat man egregious."

"A dog is faithfulness itself," replied Luke.

"To be sure."

"This animal has clearly been misused. His present wound was not the first; he bears more than one scar."

"An' all done by that insex yender, no doubt. I hate a man who'll misuse a dog—I do, by hurley!"

Yank struck the barrel of his long rifle, meditated for a moment, and then more slowly added:

"I can't feel that I hurt a deservin' man when I shot that chap, fur in a minute more his knife would hev took my life, but I did it unknowin'ly. I was sleepin' sound, an' thought I heard a wolf's howl. I opened my eyes, an' thar was a black critter right over me. I fired quick as I could, an' you see the result."

"You simply killed a ruffian to preserve your own life," Luke added.

"To be sure. 'Twas a close call, though, wa'n't it? I feel a bit ashamed that any human could creep inter my camp an' me never hear him—'tis long sence any human has did the trick afore—but I was all worn out last night, an' I thought thar was no danger."

Yank stroked his beard in a perturbed way as he spoke.

"Don't trouble yourself, Nevermiss," Luke replied. "Although not a veteran like you, I have had some experience in the West, and I know no man can always win the minor points of life's game."

"I consait not, though the Yellowbirds try to do their best. The founder o' our line, Adam

Yellowbird, o' Eden Garden, 'complished some great feats, but was finally wu'sted by an atrocious snake. Sence then our fam'ly has done pooty wal until the race come ter me. I try ter keep up the fam'ly pedigree ter high-water mark, but I hev the newrolgy like hurley, an' my left foot is a weak sister—it's a coward, my left foot is, an' prone ter run away when thar's danger."

The speaker paused, looked around, and then added.

"S'pose we set down. I reckon the danger is over fur to-night."

"Do you really expect to meet this man's allies?"

"He said it."

"And meant it."

"I consait so."

"You don't seem troubled."

"Lad, thar is a Power which has us in its keepin'. The Ruler of earth an' air knows His will, an' His will must be our law. I don't worry about any atrocious insex who hate me, but use the judgment given me, an' go right on cheerful an' hopeful."

There was something highly impressive about the mountaineer's manner. A rare simplicity was combined with coolness, dignity and modest confidence, and he looked and acted like a man capable of caring for himself in any crisis, yet one who would never be vain, self-assertive or domineering.

They sat down near the fire. The dog, at a word from Yank, stretched himself out near the veteran, and his eyes never left Yank's face.

"His soul is in 'em," quoth the mountaineer; "an' mebbe 'tain't his soul, neither. They say dogs don't hev none. Wal, I consait they're as wal off—make 'em the equals o' man, in worldly ways an' wisdom, an' we'd hev fewer good dogs than now. I hev an idee, Luke, that when we go on in the mornin' I shall insinuate ter this dog that he can go, too. He ain't harn'some, but I can't go ag'in' him fur that. My own face ain't as pooty as some, though I was a powerful favorite with the female sect when I's a young man."

The speaker passed his hand over his face with a quizzical smile. It was not a handsome face. It was irregular; his nose was large; his eyes were small; his mouth was large; and his beard was thin, though long enough; while his flaxen-hued hair hung in long, straight, unbecoming locks around his ears.

In light he was tall and decidedly "lank." His hands, arms and shoulders were large, but they were not shapely, and as he wore clothes several sizes too large for him, he had a peculiar appearance all around.

His general expression was mild, contented and good-humored, but there was something about his steady gray eyes which suggested that he was capable of energetic action when circumstances required.

His whole record proved this fact. Scrupulously honest and always in favor of peace, he was never backward when a wrong was to be righted. Under such circumstances he would at any time take the trail, and as scout, trapper and mountaineer he ranked high. By the Indians he was called "Nevermiss," and his success seemed to justify the sobriquet.

In conversation he was given to odd expressions and queer conceits, and when with his friends, his good-humor was all-pervading. His complaint that he suffered with "newrolgy" was known to be a genial fiction, and this, and other whimsicalities were characteristics of the man.

In point of age he was probably a little less than fifty, but his flaxen hair and variegated beard, showing, as they did, no signs of gray threads, made his years hard to estimate; while his frame was still as strong and hardy as that of a man half his age.

Laramie Luke was twenty-five years old. He was of medium height and weight, and finely formed. His face was bold, frank and honest, without any pretensions to so-called "beauty"—a quality never manly. He was a modest, unostentatious young man, yet he had seen service in the West which proved him a man of rare courage.

His real name was Luke Winchester, but the sobriquet gained some years before hung to him, and he was often called Laramie Luke.

For half an hour Yank and his young friend conversed by the camp-fire; then they lay down and went calmly to sleep, the dog lying close to the mountaineer.

It was day when they again awoke. Then they started a fresh fire, cooked a simple breakfast and ate it. One more step, suggested by common humanity and prudence, remained undone—to bury the dead assassin.

This they did, simply but effectually.

"We're now ready ter move on," said Yank. "I consait we sha'n't hev no more trouble, onless it's a shootin' spasm o' newrolgy."

He paused and fixed his gaze upon the dog, which followed him persistently, keeping its large, expressive eyes fixed upon his face.

"Then," the mountaineer added, "hyar's this four-footed canine. What o' him? Ef we leave him, he'll be wuss off than Moses in the bul-rushes. True, his legs will be stronger than

Moses's legs was, but the dog's lung-power is less. Strikin' likeness 'tween 'em. I say, canine, your name ain't Moses, is it?"

The dog waved his tail and ventured to bark in a subdued, respectful, but pleased way.

"You're an or'fin, Moses, an' I feel fur you—I do, by hurley!" declared Yank. "Ef I leave ye hyar, you may ketch the newrolgy, valler fever or small-pox. I've knowed dogs, Luke, ter hev small-pox so bad, that when they got wal they was used as nutmeg-graters. Moses, d'ye want ter go with me?"

"Bow-wow!" said Moses, dog-fashion, vibrating his tail vigorously.

"All right—to be sure. You're my dog from this out, an' all I'll ask on ye, is that you'll keep up the dignity o' the Yellowbird pedigree. No chicken-roost robbin', an' no fightin' o' perlite an' onoffensive cats, Moses. D'ye foller me?"

"Moses" barked again, more loudly.

"Then come on!" added Yank, throwing his rifle across his shoulder. "Foller whar I lead, an' try ter hev a change o' heart suitable ter the great change in yer worldly sp'ere an' sar-cumstances."

The dog understood that he was to be allowed to go, and he showed his joy by skipping about like a mere puppy. Yank Yellowbird accepted this devotion philosophically, but Luke, remembering the many incidents he had heard of canine fidelity, was led to moralize a bit. Moses, unlike the dogs of newspaper stories, was not anxious to lie down and starve on his old master's grave, to prove his faithfulness. It looked very much as though Moses had mind, or instinct, or something else, to a sufficient degree to know that the dead man had been a brute, and that Nevermiss was a man whom he might proudly follow to the end of the world.

And so the journey was begun, Luke and Yank walking side by side, and the dog following close at their heels. At a point some miles away, the mountaineer had a boat concealed. When this was reached their journey would be finished by water.

Laramie Luke looked forward with interest to the future. He had seen various kinds of Western towns, but never one of which the head and front was a Mission, and the chief work missionary work.

New interests and pursuits had gathered at Black Rock Bend, and it was no dull town, but Luke believed that it would possess distinct characteristics, and be of novel interest.

By night they hoped to see the town.

The sun was near the zenith when they unexpectedly reached a bend of the river and found direct progress prevented by the flowing water.

Yank grounded his long rifle and looked admiringly.

"A pooty scene, by hurley!" he observed. "The water flows like ile, don't it? Observe how black 'tis, an' then see the green o' the trees. Looks like a double curtain. Give me the woods, an' prairies, an' mountains—I like 'em, an' I don't keer who knows it!"

Luke was about to reply when Yank suddenly raised his rifle.

"Hist!" he added, warningly.

And then around the river-bend came a boat, moving as fast as the strong arms of its single occupant could urge it on; but the men on shore were not through looking at him curiously when a larger boat, containing four men, appeared in rapid pursuit.

The single voyager uttered a defiant peculiar cry.

"Maow! git up an' come at me!" he shouted. "Come an' see me, but don't rub my fur the wrong way. I'm the Kansas Kitten, an' I've got claws. Ma-o-o-ow!"

His strange cry arose shrilly again, but, even as it died away, one of his oars broke short off. His boat came almost to a halt, and the pursuers rapidly closed the gap. But the lone voyager remained undismayed.

"Maow! Now you have me, an' now you don't. Come an' feel the Kansas Kitten's claws. Ma-ow-ow-ow!"

Screeching defiantly he caught up a rifle from the bottom of the boat, but already his person was covered by the rifles of the opposing party, all of whom were rough, brutal-looking men.

The life of the Kansas Kitten was in great peril.

CHAPTER III.

THE BOY FROM WILDCAT.

ONE of the leading men of Black Rock Bend was named Steele Griffith. He was not one of the founders of the town, nor did he take an interest in missionary or educational work, but he had come there after the place was well under way and started a general merchandise store, which had succeeded so well that two-thirds of the Bend came to his door. "Griffith's Store" had grown to be an important factor, and as miners, lumbermen, hunters and about every one else purchased of him, the owner was doing very well financially.

He ranked as a very good citizen, though he never did anything to improve the town in any way. For this apathy, however, he gave a good excuse.

Mrs. Griffith was not in good health. It was

understood that her physical condition, alone, had led the Griffiths to seek a home in the wilderness. Since their arrival she had improved, but slowly—very slowly.

Her husband's devotion was the talk of the settlement. He was a talented man who might have done well in the East, in almost any way he chose, but for his wife's sake he willingly exiled himself from "the world" and, plodding along in the forest town, devoted all his time to his humble business and his wife.

Such devotion was rare, touching and beautiful. Such was the way in which Mrs. Brandreth, wife of the Mission superintendent, expressed herself, and all Black Rock Bend nodded an approving head when she said it.

It was evening, and Mr. and Mrs. Griffith sat in the dining-room of their home. He had come home from the store to supper, leaving the place in charge of Nat Westcott, his assistant, but, as the hour was early, was to return for the remainder of the evening.

Griffith was a man of at least forty years, tall, rather slender, black haired and dark complexioned. He had a face which was full of strong will, and not without certain claims to good looks. Physiognomists might have complained that his mouth was sensual, and his general expression hard and selfish, but when all persons save physiognomists rise up and call a man good and kind, physiognomists had better retire to the rear with their absurd opinions.

Marion Griffith was a woman about whom there could be no difference of opinion. There are a few persons among us who bear the stamp of goodness so indelibly that no one can fail to see it. Mrs. Griffith was of this character. She was refined, delicate, intelligent and prepossessing, though it was clear that hers was not a strong will. She was eight years her husband's junior; a slender, pale-faced, yet charming woman, who could never be any less than a lady.

The third and last inmate of the house was Dorcas Strong, a bony, masculine-looking woman of fifty years. Dorcas was a woman of two moods—the silent and the turbulent. As a rule, she had nothing to say, but when she spoke it was almost invariably to find fault, utter some sharp remark, or rail at destiny.

Steele Griffith pushed his chair back from the table.

"You are looking better this evening, Marion," he said, looking at his wife critically.

"I am feeling a little better, Steele," the wife replied, with a slight smile.

"This grand air is bound to effect a cure sooner or later."

"I hope so."

"You have more color, I am glad to say."

"There is chance for more."

"True, and we are going to have it. We are bound to make a well woman of you, my dear. I am not going to have as faithful a wife as you live a life of illness."

"I should be glad to get well," Marion answered, with a sigh.

"You shall; I am resolved on that point. We are going to have your old-time roses back, for in your recovery lies our hope of future happiness. Make haste, dear, and get well."

The affectionate husband kissed her. He then turned his gaze toward his hat, and was about to leave for the store, when a knock sounded at the door.

Dorcas Strong answered.

"Is Marion in?" asked a feminine voice.

"Where else do you s'pose she is?" tartly answered Miss Strong, and then she threw the door wide open.

A young lady entered with the nimbleness of a child, and, in truth, she was little more. Eighteen years of life had passed over her fair head, but she was one who would refuse to grow old. In form she was very small, without having a dwarfed appearance. To those who liked little women there could be no one more charming. Quick of motion, quick of speech, neat, pretty and bright as a gleam of sunshine, she was a marvel in her way.

This was the daughter of the old borderer called "Powderfoot, the Pathfinder." His real name was Stebbins; his daughter was named Nell. Both she and her father insisted that this was not a contraction of the name Nellie, and as Nell Stebbins every one knew her.

As she entered the room with her quick, impetuous motion, two faces showed an expression which came and was gone like a flash.

Nell saw Griffith and looked annoyed, while his own face evinced pleasure at sight of her. A good deal might have been argued therefrom by a critical observer, but the tell-tale signs were gone in a moment.

Nell fluttered, bird-like, down upon Mrs. Griffith.

"My dear Marion, how do you do this evening? I declare you are looking better. I shouldn't wonder if you are yet able to beat me in traveling the woods. I thought I would come in and see you a moment. Good-evening, Mr. Griffith; I thought you were at the store. Marion, you ought to be a teacher; I've had lots of fun teaching young Poor Lo to-day!"

The long speech was rattled off at astonishing

speed. With Nell, words seemed to crowd each other, and they were uttered in a way as bright as her own pretty face. But Steele Griffith bit his lip in annoyance. He understood the brief address interpolated to him.

Brief, curt and unsatisfactory, he knew that Nell meant to tell him that if she had known he was there she would not have called.

But he smiled blandly.

"I think I should veto any teaching scheme," he answered, "but I hope Marion will soon be able to accompany you in the woods."

Nell did not even look at him.

"And suppose, Marion, that we should find the Buried Treasure!" she added, addressing herself in every way, word and glance, to Mrs. Griffith. "I wish we could, for father Powderfoot was interested in that old affair, and Mary Sherwin is so poor. Only think of it, Marion! a fortune buried in the woods, and nobody the wiser. If I was a wizard I'd have that gold before another day. I would, I declare!"

"Would you give it to the heathen, Miss Stebbins?" asked Griffith.

"What! do you want to be an heir? Don't flatter yourself you will. No, sir: the money belongs to Mary, and to nobody else."

"I hope it may be found."

"Marion, suppose we go to your room; I want to see the flowers I brought you, and see if you have taken proper care of them."

Mrs. Griffith arose with her pleasant smile. She suspected the existence of nothing below the surface, but Steele was not so blind. He knew that Nell had sought an excuse to get out of his company, and a transient scowl rested on his dark face. He opened the door for the ladies politely, however, and bowed as they went out of the room!

Then he took his hat and started for the store.

He went mechanically. His head was lowered, and he was in deep thought. Resentment was in his mind, and he knew that Nell Stebbins did not like him, but all his thoughts were of her, and he did not think revengefully. Some muttered words fell from his lips as he walked, but there was no one to hear.

No one knew what was in the model husband's mind.

When he reached the store he found it somewhat crowded. His regular clerk was named Nat Westcott, but during the evening he had a second helper, and these men were very busy with the customers.

Nat Westcott was talking with a thin-faced boy, a stranger to Black Rock Bend. The latter wanted some article not in stock, and they were discussing the best way of getting it when Nat saw his employer enter the store.

"There's Mr. Griffith," he said, quickly. "Please settle it with him—I must attend to the other customers who are waiting. The boss will take care of you; he is the tall man in the derby hat."

The speaker hastened away, while the boy stranger turned toward Mr. Griffith, who was wholly unconscious of this dialogue, and of the thin-faced boy. Without looking that way, he started toward the end of the counter.

The boy took one step to accost him, and then paused abruptly. It was well that the crowd concealed what followed. Pale grew the cheeks of the boy, his hands clinched convulsively, and his eyes bore a wild, startled expression. He stared at Steele Griffith in evident terror.

Mr. Griffith hung up his hat and then moved forward to attend to the customers, but the boy did not stay to repeat his request, nor to address the proprietor. Instead he moved toward the door with long, quick steps which made his retreat almost headlong flight, and passed outside.

He did not pause there.

Griffith's store was the most easterly of the village buildings. A few rods beyond it was the huge, cliff-like ledge known as Black Rock, with the forest and the water closing hard upon its base. Toward this point went the boy, his progress a veritable flight now.

He reached the foot of the cliff and flung himself prone on the earth.

Minutes passed before he stirred again. His slight figure was almost like a grain of a sand in that majestic abode of Nature. High above him reared the dark, frowning rocks; slowly, sluggishly, yet resistlessly swept the river past; and the huge trees in their stately grandeur were like Titanic soldiers massed with solid front. A wild, somber, noble scene, yet the boy did not heed it.

When he lay down he had been panting like like one out of breath, but the violence of his emotion had passed. He at last rose to a sitting position and, again becoming almost immovable, meditated deeply.

For reasons best known to himself the sight of Steele Griffith had been a startling one. He had seen the man before. True, they had never met but once before that night, but Griffith's face was firmly fixed in the boy's mind, and it brought back a flood of recollections.

He had not expected to find Griffith there, and for a time all the boy's plans and intentions were seriously shaken. He had come to Black Rock Bend with a certain object in view, but he was

tempted then to abandon it and leave the town.

Next came the thought that, in most probability, Griffith would not recognize him, and he determined to stay.

"Yes," he muttered, sibilantly, "I will stay—for revenge!"

His hand instinctively sought the weapon he carried in his pocket. Anon, he arose and walked back to the village in a calmer mood.

Connected with the Mission was a building for the accommodation of wayfarers, but the boy knew there was also a small hotel, kept by a regular landlord, and to this place he went for shelter. He was successful, and in a short time he had written in the register this record:

"Ishmael Lee, Wildcat."

Where the town of Wildcat was he did not explain, but went at once to his room. An era of trouble began when the pale-faced boy became a dweller at Black Rock Bend.

CHAPTER IV.

THE "MODEL HUSBAND."

"You can go home now, and I will see to the store."

The last customer had departed, and in these words Steele Griffith dismissed his clerks. They went gladly, and he first watched them out of sight and then turned the key, locking himself into the store. He lighted a cigar, sat down, and, looking steadfastly at vacancy, fell into deep thought.

"Pretty as an angel!" he muttered. "For such a woman as that I could go through fire and water—and adore her, too. None of your icebergs is she. How her bright eyes can snap! I love her, but she don't love me. There's the rub. She's as saucy as Judas, and her venom is about all saved for me—but she will change. I never saw the woman yet who couldn't be won by pretty words, and I ask no better beginning than to have a female hate me. Turn ice to water, then set it boiling, and it's as warm as any one could wish. It's just so with erratic woman."

A rap sounded at the door, and Griffith arose and went forward quickly.

"Who's there?" he asked.

"Maynard," replied a low voice.

Griffith turned the key, and a second man entered—a young fellow of twenty-five, with blonde hair, a small, red mustache, and quick, energetic motions. This was the assistant superintendent of the Mission, Joseph Maynard.

Relocking the door, Griffith turned to his visitor.

"Sit down, Joe. Have a cigar, and try to make yourself happy. Wish I had a drop of something wet, but the tank has run dry."

"Never mind; I'll stand treat. You don't suppose a missionary goes without the comforts of life, do you?"

Maynard produced a flask which was well filled with an amber-hued liquid, and shook it until beads danced merrily on the surface of the contents.

"Prime whisky," he added.

"Egad, I wonder old Brandreth don't catch you," Griffith observed, as he took a strong drink.

"I'm too fly, and I can fool him every time. If he hadn't been an idiot he would never have taken me in. I made him believe I was an exemplary young man with a rare gift for business, and now I can swim in tangle-foot and he be none the wiser. It's the way of the world; the lambs never suspect the man who comes up and says, 'I'm one of you!' But, Lord bless you, a wolf may be as amiable as a saint and he won't get any credit."

The speaker drew a folded paper from his pocket.

"Here's the stuff," he tersely added.

Griffith's hand shook a little.

"You are sure of all you say about it?" he asked.

"Dead sure."

"And you think it safe to use?"

"No doubt of it. I wasn't the son of a druggist, and his clerk six years, for nothing."

"And its effect will be—will be—"

"A tablespoonful is sure and sudden death; teaspoonful four times a week, death in a month, with violent symptoms all along; half-teaspoonful daily, slow decline, and death in three months. No betraying symptoms; no traces after death; no hold for a meddling doctor, for there are not five men in America know such a drug exists."

"You are a true friend, Maynard."

The younger man shrugged his shoulders.

"Nonsense! I am only looking out for Number One. You are playing into my hands, and it's policy for me to help you in return. All I ask is your Christian gratitude when Nell Stebbins is Mrs. Steele Griffith."

"Hush! hush!" nervously exclaimed Steele.

"All right, but let me tell you I am 'onter' your fancy for Nell. Take her, and welcome; and bless you, old boy. I'd as soon make love to a she-tiger."

"I notice you have a fancy for Mary Sherwin."

"Different matter. Mary is as amiable as Nell is perverse and saucy. Radiant, calm,

divine Mary! How she stirs the good in me like A1 yeast!"

The fellow accompanied this coarse remark with a reckless laugh. He liked to throw off the mask when with Griffith, and show his real nature. At the Mission he diligently posed as an exemplary young man, and there was more money than pleasure in it.

"Let us speak of something else," he continued. "What about the Buried Treasure?"

"Nothing new."

"But we are going to have it?"

"By heavens, yes!"

"Exactly. Good deal of competition, however; there is a general hankering for that gold; it would fill a long-felt want with several persons."

"I'm afraid of that long-legged Yank Yellowbird!" Griffith peevishly declared.

"So am I."

"He and old Powderfoot have united to get it for Mary Sherwin. Now, Powderfoot is only dangerous because he possesses such few clues as exist, but Yank is a different person. They say that homely old codger is a marvel of ingenuity, and he has a wide-spread reputation for poking his nose into other folks' affairs. I'm afraid of Yellowbird—Nevermiss, the Indians call him."

"I can hardly believe that such an idle-talking person is as astute as they say, but we need not fear him in any case."

"Why not?"

Maynard looked cautiously around.

"A bullet will 'do' for Yank Yellowbird," he replied.

"Would you dare fire it?"

"Yes."

"What if you missed?"

Maynard shrugged his shoulders.

"I sha'n't miss," he returned. "If the fellow gets too fast after the Buried Treasure, I wind him up short."

The speaker did not suspect that, a little less than twenty-four hours before, another person had tried violence upon the tall mountaineer, for the same reason, and come to grief. The Buried Treasure bade fair to yet cause a good deal of trouble.

"Well, we are going to have the gold, anyhow," said Griffith, firmly.

"Right you are."

Steele glanced at the package in his hand.

"I think I'll go home now," he added.

"All right," answered Maynard, smiling quietly.

They left the store, separated at the door, and Griffith went home. When he arrived both his wife and Dorcas Strong had retired, but a light was still burning for him. He took it and went up-stairs. Mrs. Griffith was awake, and he kissed her affectionately, and inquired solicitously how she was feeling.

"How is your medicine?" he asked, presently.

"It is all right," she answered.

"The amber-hued liquid is getting low."

"Yes; I shall have to mix more to-morrow."

"I will do it now. I have the time, and I fancy I know better how to do such things than the majority of novices. The mere foundation of medicines is not all there is to them. I'll see to this."

From a shelf he took a small bottle which was partially filled with a yellowish powder, and then descended to the kitchen. Securing a drinking-glass, he first put into it a quantity of the powder, and then filled the glass with water. The powder dissolved quickly, making an amber-hued liquid.

His next movement was more suggestive. First going to the door to make sure that no one was watching, he opened the package given him by Joseph Maynard. It contained a grayish-colored powder.

Steele Griffith paused and looked at it for several moments. His parted lips revealed his teeth, and his face had a wolfish expression. That moment marked a crisis in his career, and he paused for a brief space to look into the future—or what he hoped the future would be.

If that powder did its work well, the whole current of his life would be changed.

Arousing, he measured out a half-teaspoonful of the powder and dropped it in the glass. It seemed to wholly dissolve at once, and to leave no trace.

He waited a few minutes, and then carried the mixture up-stairs.

"I may as well throw away the old medicine," he said to his wife. "This is cool and fresh. Will you have some now?"

She acquiesced, and took the usual quantity.

"Didn't you make it rather strong?" she asked.

"I think not. Why?"

"It seems to have a peculiar taste."

Griffith felt his face flush, and turned aside.

"Some taste from the spoon, probably," he answered.

"Very likely. The medicine is nice and cool, and I thank you for mixing it."

His heart beat more freely, and he made a suitable reply. He retired, and, curiously enough, that night dreamed that Nell Stebbins came into his store and tried to sell him a boat-

load of gray powder, to be used for medical purposes. But then, even a model husband will have odd dreams concerning his business enterprises, and Steele Griffith liked to have a well-stocked store.

He did not tell his dream to Mrs. Griffith—possibly because she complained that she had not slept as well as usual, having been troubled with some fever.

Shortly after he went down to the store a customer entered. Nat Westcott started to wait upon him, but the new-comer went directly to Griffith, and the clerk, recognizing the boy of the previous evening, kept back.

Ishmael Lee stood up by the counter and made known his want, looking the proprietor full in the eyes. The matter was one which required some time and attention, but Griffith finally agreed to fill the order in a week's time, and the boy went out.

Steele looked after him thoughtfully.

"Nat, who was that?" he asked.

"Don't know, sir; stranger to me," the clerk replied.

"Seems to me I've seen him before, but I don't know when or where. However, it don't matter."

Mr. Griffith would not have spoken so confidently if he could have read Ishmael's mind as the latter walked away.

"He don't know me," thought the boy. "I've settled that, and now I'm resolved to stay at Black Rock Bend. I have double work to do now, and nothing can drive me away!"

CHAPTER V.

KANSAS KITTEN.

YANK YELLOWBIRD'S rifle leaped to his shoulder like a thing of life, but there remained idle. He was deeply interested in the scene on the river, but, though his sympathies naturally went with the weaker party, he was not sure which was in the right. As the only thing he could at present do was to shoot one of the larger party, he was not prepared to take sides so radically until he knew who was right and who wrong.

The eccentric genius who had called himself Kansas Kitten proved equal to the emergency, however.

One moment he stood in his boat with the rifles of the other men bearing upon him, and then his peculiar cry rung out more sharply than ever:

"Ma-ow-ow-ow!"

Wildly arose the screech, and the next instant the man went over backward, cut the water like a fish, and disappeared beneath the surface.

The larger boat came sweeping on and, striking the smaller one, overturned it completely, but there was no sign of the Kansas Kitten. One man, presumably the leader, arose in the boat.

"Look sharp!" he ordered, "and we'll have him yet. Take him alive if you can, but get him anyway. Hold! He will make for yonder point—pull that way, and I'll stand ready with my rifle!"

The order was obeyed, and the boat headed exactly for Yank and Laramie Luke and moved briskly along.

"We're liable ter hev comp'ny," quietly observed the mountaineer.

"I'll wager something they don't get Kansas Kitten, or whatever his name is," added Luke.

"I consait not. Jedgin' by the way he's opened, he is a man w'al able ter face tribulations an' distresses, an' wu'st 'em. But who be them atrocious insex? Don't like the style on 'em at all, by hurley!"

Nevermiss handled his rifle with visible excitement, but, at that moment, Kansas Kitten arose half-way between the shore and the boat. A broad smile was on his face, and, reckless of the danger, he turned and again uttered his characteristic cry:

"Ma-o-o-ow!"

Promptly the man in the boat leveled his rifle, but he was too late. Again Kansas Kitten disappeared in the water, but the pursuers seemed confident as to his destination and rowed on rapidly.

"Lad," said Yank, quietly, "shall we interfere?"

"I say, yes. Look at the men in the boat! I'll stake my last dollar they are cut-throats."

"My idee, exactly. Now, then, break cover an' show 'em our wepons!"

They pushed through the covering bushes, and Yank's voice rung out clearly:

"Hold up, ye egregious scamps! Keep off this bank, fur no trespassers ain't allowed."

The men in the boat turned their eyes toward the point of woods in surprise—two rifles were bearing upon them, and back of the weapons were Yank and Luke, grim and determined. Instinctively the boatmen ceased rowing, while their leader stood upright in the craft and looked in silent irresolution, if not dismay. Then it was that the cause of all this disturbance appeared close to his new companions, and, standing waist-deep in water, flung up his arms triumphantly and again raised his voice:

"Maow! Perhaps you kin take Kansas Kitten now. Ma-yow-yow-yow!"

His cat-call was piercing, but it is doubtful if

those in the boat heard it. The menacing rifles spoke a language they could plainly understand, and it had due effect upon them. Apparently the leader gave some order, for the oarsmen suddenly dipped the blades again and began rowing backward with vigor.

Such a retreat was not to be expected from such bold-looking fellows, but go they did without standing on the order of their departure. As fast as their strong arms could urge the boat on they receded from shore.

Then Yank Yellowbird dropped his gaze to the man whom they had befriended.

"Stranger," said the veteran, "ef I's you I'd come out o' the water. You'll git yer feet wet as hurley, an' like as not, hev an egregious set-to with the newrolgy."

Kansas Kitten turned his bearded face around for a moment.

"Give me time ter cool my blood. Them chaps rubbed my fur the wrong way o' the grain, an' my back is up. I come o' a dogmatic feline fam'ly, an' kits, cats, sacks an' wives, we all hate ter part with our lives. See them chaps go! Maow! Ma-ow-ow-yah-ow!"

Long-drawn and exultant was his cry, and peculiarly like what it purported to be—the cry of a cat—but this eccentric person could command a volume of sound even greater than the genuine cat-serenader.

"Mister," replied Yank, "I'd like ter know the meanin' o' this animated disagreement."

"Jealousy—all jealousy."

"How so?"

"Ain't this wood free ter all?"

"I consait so."

"So do I. Yes, sirree. But them chaps seem ter object ter my roamin' the pathless wild, an' they cut up rusty, an' rubbed my fur the wrong way o' the grain."

"Who be they, anyhow?"

"The boss o' the lot is called Pride Oliver, but I heerd enough ter know he's second fiddle ter one Link Boxshot."

"Hullo! I've heerd that name afore!" Yank quickly replied.

"Ever heerd any good on him?"

"Not an artom."

"I should say not."

"Thar was once a road-agent o' the name over nigh Leadville, an' ef the egregious varmint has come hyar, we may look out fur tribulations an' distresses. I don't know many men with a wu'ss pedigree than Link Boxshot. A good subject fur the hangman, he is."

"You don't seem ter like him, pardner."

"I ain't finikel, but I was born with antipathies, an' they will stick to me. Mister, hadn't you better come out o' the water an' tell us all about yer adventur'?"

"I'll see how my blood is," gravely returned the stranger, who then proceeded to feel of his pulse in the most approved style. "A grain fast," he added, "but the water is havin' effect. I think I am safe ter come out. Maow! maow!"

With a gentle repetition of his old cry he ascended to the bank, shook himself, and extended a hand each to Yank and Luke.

"Gents, I thank you fur yer ready aid," he added. "I'm a dogmatic member o' the cat fam'ly, but I know when I git a squar' deal. Thank ye, hearty. My name, as you may hev heerd me caterwaul, is Kansas Kitten. I'm a free rover o' the woods, an' no domesticated cat. My claws are eleven inches long, an' I kin scratch like all creation."

"Glad ter meet sech an int'restin' specimen o' the hooman race," soberly replied Yank. "I go some on fam'ly jenealogy myself, an' I like a good, clean pedigree. The Yellowbirds ain't backward in that respect. We trace our pedigree back ter Adam Yellowbird, o' Eden Garding, who married Eve Smith. Beyond that, all is vague. Ef Adam had a father, he ain't down in the books, an' it is posserble that Adam was born an orfin."

"So you're Yank Yellowbird. I've heerd o' you, all the way from Texas ter Manitoba. Glad ter meet ye. You look honest, an' honest men I like. Three cheers fur the bold an' honest! Maow! maow! maow!"

"This 'ere is my 'sociate fur the time bein', Mr. Laramie Luke, at yer service—an' not that, either, but hyar present—an' now let me remind ye I requested an account o' yer adventur'."

"You shall hev it," Kansas Kitten promptly answered. "I was a-travelin' this wilderness, on my way ter the town o' Black Rock Bend, when I come upon a camp o' four men—the same you see'd a bit ago, gents. I at onc't maowed gently, an' asked fur a place by their fire. They gave it, an' I sojourned for a couple hours, but, bime-by, I seen that mischief was afloat. Pride Oliver an' his gang didn't seem ter take ter me. Now, my ears is as sharp as anybody's, an' I heerd 'em agree ter kill me off-hand. Of course I didn't like that, an' I watched my chance, sneaked away, took the smallest o' their two boats, an' tried ter escape. They chased me, an' you seen the eend on't."

"Why should they want to kill you?" Luke asked.

"As nigh as I kin figger it, thar is a pestiferous gang o' outlaws about, o' which Link Boxshot is chief an' Pride Oliver lieutenant, an' they

don't propose ter give honest men a chance. They'd wound me up, sure, only I'm a dogmatic member o' the cat tribe, an' when my back riz, I got out."

"To be sure," added Yank. "It's clear you ain't no child, mister; you showed pluck an' wit on the river, though your menag'rie screechin' ain't ter my taste. When you's flounderin' in the water you reminded me of a sarcumstance recorded in the log-book o' my uncle, Noah Yellowbird. He was a sailor, ye see, an' owned a ship he called the Ark. Once he went out sailin' with a select party o' friends. Afore they left the dock a man named Jones come along an' wanted ter go with 'em, but my uncle wouldn't hear to it. They sailed, an' thought they was rid o' Jones when, arter awhile, Noah looked erround an' see the atrocious insex swimmin' arter them like all posses't. It was rainin' like hurley, but Jones could be seen comin' on full speed."

"Lemme git on," sez he.

"Not much, I won't," sez Uncle Noah.

"I'll pay my fare," sez Jones.

"Not on this boat," sez my uncle.

"I'm a good sailor," sez Jones.

"We don't want no sailors, an' you can't come aboard. This is a select party," sez my uncle.

"Select fiddle-sticks?" sez Jones; "it's nothin' but a cattle-boat. You hev ter carry live stock ter pay the expense o' the trip. How kin you tell the four-legged hogs from the two-legged ones?" sez Jones.

"No insolence," sez Uncle Noah, sternly.

"I'll git square with you," sez Jones; an' then he swum right in front o' the ship, an' they had ter inverse the injine quick ter keep him from tippin' 'em over.

"Lemme on," sez Jones.

"I'll see you funder, by hurley!" sez my uncle.

"You will see me funder, fur I'll stick to ye like sin," sez Jones. "I want ter git in out o' the rain, fur water don't agree with me; an' ef ye don't do it, I'll worry ye down."

"You go ter Halifax!" retorted my uncle, as he flung a coal-bucket at the mean insex.

"But Jones didn't go ter Halifax; he jest hung round that ship an' worried 'em. Whenever they tried ter sail he got right in front o' them, an' thar was the wu'st disturbance you ever seen on a pleasure craft. They tacked, an' luffed, an' hemmed, an' squared the main-mast, but ev'ry time Jones was right ahead on 'em, an' they couldn't go over sixty knots an' a few odd skeins an hour. An', by hurley, Jones kep' it up forty days, doorin' which time it rained continual, an' in the eend he got ter part first. Noah Yellowbird was the maddest man you ever seen, an' he sot right down an' writ a full account on't, an' bade his future descenders ter beware o' all men named Jones."

"Ma-yow-yow!" briskly uttered Kansas Kitten, "I see that your fam'ly hev their ups an' downs like mine. Great fam'ly, mine is, fur downs. We're down all the time, except when our backs are up. My stomach is down now. Is thar a hotel nigh here?"

"We hev some pervision along," Yank answered, "an' we'll prepare it an' hev a repast. Luke, s'pose you an' the Kitten scout a bit, an' be sure nobody ain't watchin' ter devour us. The newrolgy is troutlin' me uncommon bad, so I won't try ter scout, but I consait I kin put ter-gether a dinner fit fur hungry men. The Yellowbirds are nat'ral cooks, men an' women—'specially the women."

CHAPTER VI.

THE MYSTERIOUS PACKAGE.

LARAMIE LUKE and Kansas Kitten moved away on their appointed mission. The latter was without a rifle, though he had preserved his revolver, and he did not go far away from Luke. The younger man made such a circuit as he considered advisable, but, seeing no one, finally approached the river again at a point not far beyond where Yank was preparing dinner.

Emerging from the thicker part of the wood, he stood on the bank and looked up the stream. The river flowed as peacefully as though it had not recently been a scene of strife.

Luke's gaze was slowly withdrawn, and then rested upon some object idly drifting in the water near his feet. It was a small package, scarcely larger than a letter, and so much resembling one that his curiosity was aroused.

He stooped and picked it up.

A document of some kind it certainly was, though well-dampened by contact with the river water, and not a little torn in places. His investigation went on. A blank cover was nearly torn to pieces, and this he discarded. A written paper was inside, and at first glance his eyes caught these words, boldly written:

"DESCRIPTION OF THE MURDERER!"

A compact paragraph followed, but Luke, anxious to begin at the beginning, unfolded the whole document. It proved to be a mixture of newspaper paragraphs and writing, but the commencement again revealed the bold penmanship, with a head-line at the top, and Luke's interest was not diminished.

The article began as follows:

INSTRUCTIONS TO DETECTIVE LOCKE.

"You will proceed at once to Black Rock Bend, and spare no effort, or expense, to find the murderer of Abraham Sherwin."

A hand was placed suddenly upon Luke's arm. He wheeled, and found himself face to face with Kansas Kitten. The usual buoyant, careless expression was gone from the man's face, and he looked troubled and stern. Somehow, the interruption disconcerted Luke, and he stood gazing at his companion in silent embarrassment.

"You've got some readin' matter, I see," said the Kitten, in a low voice.

"Yes."

"Would ye mind givin' it ter me?"

"I haven't read it yet, myself."

"Why should ye read it?"

"Why shouldn't I read it?"

There was a touch of sharpness in both voices, and the men looked at each other with something of belligerency.

"Is it yourn?" asked Kansas Kitten.

"I found it."

"Then you don't put in no claim ter it?"

"As much as any one. It is a waif; I picked it out of the river a moment ago."

"Don't ye think the real owner has a better claim to it than you hev?"

"Do you know the real owner, Mr. Kansas Kitten?"

"Yes, it's mine. I'll thank ye ter pass it over," and Kansas Kitten held out his hand.

"Not so fast, my good sir," replied Luke, with increasing interest. "Look at this document. It is addressed to one Detective Locke."

"It's mine, jest the same."

"Are you Detective Locke?"

Kansas Kitten looked anywhere but into Luke's face.

"Never mind what I be—though it's absurd ter think I am a detective—the paper's mine. I lost it while I's havin' a brush with Pride Oliver's men. It floated hyar, and hyar is its owner. I'd like the paper."

Again he extended his hand.

"Pardon me, friend, but don't be too fast. Far be it from me to wish to rob any man of his property, but this document, if genuine, is of value. You call yourself 'Kansas Kitten.' This paper is addressed to 'Detective Locke.' How can we reconcile the discrepancy? Obviously, only by assuming that you are in disguise."

Luke looked critically at his companion as he spoke. Kansas Kitten looked to be a man of thirty-five years. He was strongly formed, his hair was long and shaggy, and his beard full and thick, while his sun-browned face was liberally plastered with dirt. The features thereof were rather coarse, but it was a frank, manly face, which bore signs of at least average intelligence.

"I don't know any law that obleeges me ter give my fam'ly hist'ry," he doggedly answered, "an' I hate ter hev words with a man who's befriended me. I like you an' the tall man over yon, an' ef he's reelly Yank Yellowbird, which I see no reason ter doubt, I'd like ter be on good terms wi' ye, specially ez you say you're goin' ter Black Rock Bend. But, sir, I must hev what is my property."

Kansas Kitten did not raise his voice, nor was his manner in any way offensive, but, looking straight into Luke's eyes now, he made his request with firmness not to be misunderstood.

Laramie Luke was not frightened in the least. Years of danger in the wildest parts of the West had made him almost as cool as Yank Yellowbird himself, and mere threats would have fallen upon his ears without effect.

He had more to think of, however. He was beginning to see Kansas Kitten in a new light.

At first he had regarded the man only as a jolly vagabond of the West, but only in a very obtuse mind could the document he held have failed to arouse suspicion. Kansas Kitten claimed it as his, and it was instructions to a detective to proceed to Black Rock Bend and arrest a murderer.

If the Kitten's claim was genuine, he stood revealed as a man of importance.

"Friend," the young man replied, "fortune grant that I do not do any man wrong; if this paper is yours, and I am inclined to think it is, you have only to prove your property, and you shall have it. I had time to read only a few words here, but I noticed that newspaper clippings were pasted on the sheet at intervals. Can you tell me the head-line of any of these clippings?"

"The first," answered Kansas Kitten, looking steadily at his questioner, "is headed, 'Is it Murder?'"

Luke referred to the paper, and the head-line met his gaze at once.

He promptly passed over the document.

"I am satisfied that your claim is just," he said.

"Thank ye, messmate, thank ye, hearty," replied Kansas Kitten, with a manifest air of relief. "I thought a gentleman like you was open ter argyment."

"I hope that I am not deaf to reason. By the way, is there any promise you wish me to make?"

"Promise?"

"Yes."

"What d'ye mean?"

"I saw the inside of that paper—saw to whom it was addressed—saw, in a general way, the subject of it."

Kansas Kitten looked out across the river.

"Wal?"

"I am done," Luke quietly responded. "If there is more said, it must come from you."

"I think I understan'," the Kitten cried.

"We all hev our secrets, you'n me, an' others; an' we hev our follies. Solomons ain't plenty sence the big frost o' 1801. Bein' foolish, we may hev foolish things erbout us, sech ez papers."

"Put it as you will, Mr. Kansas Kitten."

"Havin' follies," pursued the man, "we don't like 'em made public. Ef you'll let the matter o' this paper be a dead secret, I'd regard it as a great favor."

"From one man I have no secrets—a man as true, honest and sagacious, as man can be. I refer to worthy Yank Yellowbird."

"I'm glad ye do. I don't know o' a man more worthy o' confidence than him. The 'hull West rings with his name. A lamb in peace, an' a lion in war—that's what they say on him. I don't ax no secrets from him, fur I know a man when I see him, an' I'm only a quiet, harmless vagabond, anyhow. Nobody kin say more fur Kansas Kitten, though he's a dogmatic cat, an' great on the yowl. Ma-a-a-ow!"

The speaker sounded his peculiar note just as Nevermiss walked toward them.

"You ought ter hev that patented, by hurley!" declared the mountaineer, genially. "Ef I ever go huntin' cats I'll hev you fur a decoy. Never could squawl like that, myself, unless I had the newflogy egregious bad. S'prisin' how you did tune up when the outlaws was arter ye. Fur my own part, when I git inter battle my left foot allays gits skeered—it's an egregious weak sister—an' it needs all my time an' care ter keep it from runnin' away with me. But you did wal; you did very wal; you did most mighty wal, sir."

Yank stroked his beard and looked benignly at Kansas Kitten, as though he found a good deal to admire in the latter's cat-call.

"An' now fur dinner," he added. "Foller me, an' we'll gorge ourselves at the festive board; an' not at the board, either, fur we ain't got so much as a shingle o' split timber. But the food is thar, ef the banquet hall is missin'."

They obeyed, and were soon doing justice to the meal.

Kansas Kitten was in an unusually buoyant mood, and he and Yank talked steadily. Without any direct words to that effect, it had come to be generally understood that the Kitten was to accompany Yank and Luke to Black Rock Bend. Yank was pleased with the stranger, and the latter certainly made himself agreeable. Laramie Luke was unusually silent—he had new food for thought. Kansas Kitten had suddenly assumed importance in his eyes. He felt sure that the man was a detective, and that serious business had brought him to the forest region.

He tried to remember the few incomplete words he had read of the document Kansas Kitten claimed.

There was one brief sentence which read: "Description of the murderer." Another was, "Instructions to Detective Locke," and then the document proper began by saying that he was to proceed to Black Rock Bend and arrest the murderer of—whom?

The last name had caught Luke's notice—it was Sherwin. Luke remembered it because Yank had spoken of a Mary Sherwin who was teacher in the Mission.

He wondered vaguely if there was any connection between the names, but gave more attention to Kansas Kitten and his supposed errand. If the man was going to the Bend to arrest a murderer, there might be some excitement there before the drama ended.

And who was the "murderer?" Luke wished he had read the description, but, as he had not, there was no help for it. He must go on, and, perhaps, the first hand he grasped in a cordial way might be that of the man Kansas Kitten was hunting down.

CHAPTER VII.

THE OUTLAW CHIEF.

DINNER was over, and Nevermiss arose.

"I reckon we may as wal be off," he observed.

"Will ye go with us, Kitten? I hev a boat a little ways above, an' good, stout rowin' will land us at the Bend considerably before dark."

"Twill please me ter be counted in," answered Kansas Kitten. "I know when I'm in good comp'ny."

"At this rate o' increase we'll march inter the Bend with an army. Fu'st Moses, an' then you. Hev you observed that dog, stranger? Moses, his name is."

"A right good dorg, I should say. Han'some, too."

"Han'some is as han'some does. I don't claim no great amount o' beauty for Moses but when yer come ter brains, the dog is thar. Good Moses!"

The mountaineer laid his hand on the dog's

head, and the animal's tail vibrated more than ever. Every moment seemed to increase his sudden, deep affection for Yank. A bountiful dinner had not lessened this regard.

The party soon left the camp, but, before they went, Luke noticed that Kansas Kitten threw something into the fire. The odor of burning paper followed, and it was not hard to surmise that their new companion had done away with all danger of another betrayal through the medium of the mysterious document.

Keeping near the river-bank, the party went on. Carelessness was not indulged in. Kansas Kitten was of the opinion that Pride Oliver and his men would not so easily give up the attack on himself, and his ideas were not disputed.

Followed by Moses the trio went on for a mile or more, but Yank finally came to a halt.

"I ain't satisfied," he declared.

"Why not?" Luke asked.

"Thar are noises in the woods I can't a'count fur on no natural hypothemuse."

"What have you heard, Nevermiss?"

"Calls."

"Of what?"

"Men, I consait. They might fool young ears, but not mine—Land o' Goshen! I should say not. When I hear a painter scream I don't think it's a grizzly; an' though some men kin imitate birds, an' sech, pretty tolerable, it's hard ter fool an old mountaineer who's tramped the woods and hills ever sence he was the size o' a grasshopper."

The veteran tapped the barrel of his long rifle with the fingers of one hand, and looked keenly into the forest around them. Luke and Kansas Kitten watched him in silence and waited his pleasure; neither claimed the skill that he unquestionably possessed.

"A hen can't squawl like an eagle," added Nevermiss, now looking at Luke, and shaking his long forefinger at him, "an' she ain't fool enough ter try. Some men ain't got the sense o' a hen, an' thar are sech around us. They're marshaling their hosts, an' I want ter know why. You two hide in the bushes nigh here, an' I'll look around an artom. Don't talk while I'm gone."

The speaker started, and Moses fixed an earnest look on his face and evinced a desire to follow.

"Wal, I dunno," pursued Yank; "your style ain't knowed ter me. No voucher fur yer pedigree, an'— But this is a good time ter test it. Come on, dog!"

Moses became the image of delight, and then followed at his master's heels. At the end of a few yards Yank looked back, smiled and nodded approvingly. The dog's steps were as noiseless and skillful as even he could wish.

Kansas Kitten and Luke exchanged a few words; then sought separate thickets, fifty feet apart, for cover. Luke was somewhat piqued that he had heard none of the suspicious sounds audible to the mountaineer, but it was a consolation to know who had excelled him. He lay close to the ground and waited the progress of events.

Fifteen minutes passed, and then an unusual object passed before his vision. He looked more closely, and saw three men approaching. All were strangers to him, but he was at once impressed by their wild and lawless air. Their dress was peculiar, and they walked with the swagger seen only in men who have thrown aside the healthy restraints of law and society.

One of them, in particular, impressed Laramie Luke. He was at least six feet tall and proportioned like a gladiator. Next to his size, his most prominent characteristic was the yellowish-red beard which hung low upon his breast. It was wonderfully thick, and, curling and crinkling, made a veritable mat.

There was conscious pride in the man's carriage, which did not degenerate into a swagger as low as that of his fellows, yet there was nothing noble about him. Quite the reverse. He looked like a ruffian.

When they were near Luke's refuge they paused, and then, for the first time, the young man saw two persons coming from the opposite direction. The giant greeted the new-comers brusquely.

"Well, what news?" he demanded.

"Thar ain't none, captain."

"No signs o' the sneaks we're after?"

"Not a sign, captain."

"To perdition with such mules as you. Egad! I'd give more for one good trailer than all of you. Whar is Pride Oliver?"

"Busy huntin'."

"Humph!"

"It ain't no fool o' a job ter find Yank Yellowbird, Captain Boxshot," meekly suggested the subordinate.

"Curse Yank Yellowbird! Thar's somethin' I don't understand, by the fiends! I thought he'd be a dead duck before now, but hyar he is—somewhar—alive an' kickin', an' thar ain't a sign o' Joe Cross."

"I'm afeard Joe is gone under, captain."

"I hope so, by Judas. Joe was red-hot fur the job; he could make way with Yank Yellowbird—oh! yes—just as easy; but I swear I don't seem ter see that he's done it. What in perdition is thar about that lank, homely, easy-goin'?"

old fool that makes him so hard ter beat! I wear I don't know."

"Men say he never was beat."

"He's goin' ter git beat, by Satan!"

"Or we lose the Buried Treasure."

"That's it, exactly. Personally, I ain't got anything ag'in' Yellowbird, but give up that buried gold ter him I won't. Such a pile o' the stuff don't grow on every bush. Jest think of it—'twould make the hull crowd of us rich enough so we could retire from biz. But Yank Yellowbird has ter poke in an' say he'll git it for a pale-faced chit of a gal. He will git his head knocked off, or my name ain't Link Boxshot."

The outlaw paused, scowled, handled his rifle nervously, and then resumed:

"I have an idee that ef we had old Powderfoot, the Pathfinder, in our hands, somethin' might come of it. I can't help thinkin' that a little sharp-stick work would quicken his wits. We may find it best ter gobble him, yit."

"I'd rather hev his da'rter."

"Nonsense!"

"She's pooty ez a peach."

"You're a sentimental fool, Dan Weeks."

"I know it cap'n."

"This ain't no time fur foolin'. We've come nigh Black Rock Bend on business, right from the word go. Ef we kin get the Buried Treasure we're all right, an' we're goin' ter have it, ef we wipe out all the Bend ter do it. Confound them folks, with their Mission; I kin give them p'int's new ter them in ev'ry way. The Mission would make a fine blaze."

"Right you are, captain, an' I hope it may come ter that; but they've got some good men thar. Old Powderfoot ain't no chicken, an' you know Yank Yellowbird. By the way, captain, you ain't seen no more o' the boy I told ye I seen skulkin' 'round your quarters, hev ye?"

Laramie Luke saw Boxshot flash an angry glance at his follower.

"Didn't I tell you to drop that?"

"Yes."

"Do it, then."

"That's all right, cap'n, but we are all members o' one band, an' our hats hang on the same peg. I mistrust that boy, an' I'm goin' ter say so."

"Say it, an' be hanged!" growled Boxshot. "You needn't worry about a boy. I know him, an' he's now away doin' my work. Now you dry up. Ah! hyar comes Oliver."

The outlaw lieutenant approached, accompanied by his three men.

"Any news, Pride?"

"Not a bit," the lieutenant answered. "The fellows have slipped us for now, but, if we hustle around, we'll have them yet—unless that infernal Yank Yellowbird outwits us. 'Tisn't any fool of a party we have against us. That Laramie Luke was a noted scout down in Wyoming, and the crazy knave who calls himself Kansas Kitten is more demon than fool."

"I don't care if they are all demons!" retorted Boxshot. "Our only hope o' getting the Buried Treasure is to wind up Yellowbird, an' we're goin' ter do it. We are goin' ter have the Buried Treasure, ef anybody does, ef we have ter kill off ev'ry soul within a hundred mile o' hyar. Now away you go—off on the trail!"

The giant captain moved his hand imperiously, and all his men except the lieutenant hastened away. Boxshot had made Oliver a secret gesture, and he remained. The leader lowered his voice and continued:

"I didn't fully ketch onter your idee about Kansas Kitten, or whatever his name is."

"I believe him to be a dangerous man," Oliver replied. "When he came to our camp-fire he questioned us about old Powderfoot, the Pathfinder, Yank Yellowbird and others; and I soon decided that he was more than he seemed on the surface to be. I remembered that you had given the opinion that Powderfoot knew more about the Buried Treasure than he had told, and it struck me that Kansas Kitten might be an experienced miner, sent for to aid them."

"I don't see what good an old miner could do 'em. True, he might locate the lost diggings, but the Treasure is supposed ter be buried sev'ral mile this side o' the diggings. As fur Powderfoot, I feel sure he knows a secret about the Treasure, but what is it?"

"For one, I have no idee."

"Nor I," Boxshot confessed, "but I'm goin' ter know. We'll gobble up old Powderfoot an' force him ter talk."

"If he will."

"Thar ain't no 'ifs' about it. Once in my hands, he's got ter speak out. You know me, Pride Oliver, an' know ef I am the man ter be defied by any human I lay hands on!"

And the outlaw drew up his massive form proudly.

CHAPTER VIII.

RUNNING THE GANTLET.

LARAMIE LUKE watched the outlaw leader with close attention. He was an object of interest, not only because his ponderous frame gave him impressive dignity of the kind any other species of big brute may exercise, but because he bade fair to be a power around Black Rock Bend.

Heretofore, banded lawlessness had played no part in the history of the town, but a gang like Boxshot's would not long be near at hand and give no color to events. On the contrary, they were likely to have much to do with the near future of the Bend.

The conversation between Boxshot and Oliver soon ended. They were too anxious to run down the hunted men to idle away much time, and they walked on to join in the search.

Like their followers they took the direction in which Yank Yellowbird had gone, and Luke was feeling some uneasiness concerning the mountaineer when he was surprised to see Yank emerge from a thicket not three rods distant, followed by Moses.

The veteran's air was quiet and easy, and he looked toward the young man's covert and nodded carelessly.

"You can come out, lad. The atrocious insex hev gone right away from their game, as novices usual do. Kin out, an' let us hold a counsel o' war."

Both Luke and Kansas Kitten emerged from cover.

"I didn't dream you were near, Nevermiss," the man from Laramie acknowledged.

"I didn't advertise the fack," was the dry reply. "This is a time when it's jest as wal ter step light. I did the best I could, seein' that I had the newrolgy bad, an' the weak sister was bound ter run; while as fur Moses, I must say he's egregious soft-footed. A ree-markable dog is Moses, by hurley!"

Yank laid his hand on the dog's head, and the friendly caress was acknowledged with a rapid vibration of the animal's tail.

"Maow! I like dorgs, myself," said Kansas Kitten, "but this don't take us out o' the woods. Yellowbird, you're our leader, an' we wait yer word o' counsel."

"Bein' an era o' triberlation an' distress, I think we had better lay low," Yank observed. "The woods is full o' the hostile scamps, an' I allow it would be hard ter git through 'em in a direck line. We could swim the river an' stan' some show, but, by hurley, I ain't goin' ter git my raiment wet fur them creetur's."

The Kitten gravely felt of his pulse.

"Reg'lar as a clock; I don't need no duckin'. Have it yer own way, gents; I'm a dogmatic feline, but in this case I don't keer a cent."

"Come with me, then. Thar's a knoll over yender, an' we'll camp thar fur awhile. Ef the enemy hang on, we'll wait till dark an' then run the gantlet. You mustn't s'pose we couldn't git through now, but thar ain't no need o' hurry, as we may as wal avoid a skirmish. Besides, I hev a scheme fur worryin' the insex. Their boats are by the bank o' the river, half a mile below, an' ef they leave them thar ontil dark they're liable ter lose 'em—they be, by hurley!"

While the mountaineer spoke they had been walking toward the knoll. It was reached without trouble, and Yank placed them as he wished. Each one of the trio knew that great danger menaced them; there were, Yank admitted, over twenty of Boxshot's men near at hand, and discovery meant a fight against great odds. And nothing would please the outlaws more than to kill the three men outright.

"Tain't the first close corner I've ben in," observed the mountaineer, philosophically. "Land o' Goshen! the Yellowbirds are nat'ral heirs ter triberlation an' distress. I've had my share on 'em. I had the measles afore I was a month old, and the distemper raged so malevolently that I lost all my front teeth. Then when I went ter school thar was an epidemic o' sin, an' I had it the wu'st way. The teachers doctored me with 'ile o' birch, a'plied external ter my legs, an' broke so many sticks over me that thar was a scarcity o' fire-wood, an' many folkses perished in consequence, but the teachers found enough sticks ter keep me warm."

Yank caressed his lower limbs and sighed mournfully.

"Then come courtin'," he added. "I ketched that, an' had it bad. I had some words with a pooty gal who wore specks an' red hair, an' it give me an egregious uncomfor'ble feelin' in my left chest. I went ter see her about it, but found it hard ter speak out, fur fear she'd think I blamed her, but I finally got up courage."

"I ain't wal," sez I.

"You look sorter sick," sez she.

"I've got a pain hyar," sez I, a-p'intin' at my heart.

"It's dyspepsy," sez she.

"It's wuss when I see you," sez I.

"Better go home an' see yer marm," sez she.

"A word from you'll cure me," sez I.

"Be you sure?" sez she.

"I be," sez I.

"Then," sez she—"good-night!"

"Hol' on," sez I; "I come a-courtin' on you!"

"You great goose!" sez she, "that settles it. I've borne the infliction o' yer comp'ny 'cause I thought you's sick, an' I pitied ye; but my time an' talents is throwed away. You never'll make a Cupid while you carry a nose o' that size, an' I don't want ter hear no more about it. Thar is the door, sir!" sez she.

"I'm much obleeged," sez I, "an' now won't you write out yer refusal? I never wanted ter spark ye, fur I ain't partial ter red hair, but my marm was set on't, an' she won't b'lieve me unless you sign the papers. Her idee was ter hev ye in the Yellowbird famly so she could use yer specks part o' the time, an' make a savin' o' the surplus fund. I consait she can worry along though, an' I'm much obleeged ter you fur sayin' no."

"An' then I marched home, an' went up on the haymow, an' blubbered so loud in my sorrier that the story got abroad that we had a wild catamount in the barn."

Quietly the mountaineer told the story to the end, but the last words had barely passed his lips when he suddenly lifted his long rifle and his eyes shot a keen glance across the knoll.

"Down!" he added, in a quick way, wholly unlike his usual utterance. "The atrocious insex is about!"

He set the example by crouching low, and Moses flashed a glance from the quarter of suspicion to his master, and then lay close to the ground, with his sparkling eyes directed as were those of the men.

There was a period of doubt. Footsteps were to be heard as some one ascended the knoll, but the underbrush was thick and concealed the unknown. Slow and catlike were his movements, and none of the trio doubted that it was one of Boxshot's men. Discovery seemed almost certain, but they were not men to feel fear. The idea was common with them that they must strike first, and prevent an alarm, if possible; but if such an alarm came, and the whole outlaw force came rushing toward the knoll, the trio knew how to receive them.

Then out into view stepped a man whose skin was not white but red—an Indian. He was a lithe, sinewy, bold-eyed fellow, upon whom civilization seemed thus far to have made no impression.

Laramie Luke knew at once that the red-skin was not searching for them. He did not glance to the right or left, but, with an eager expression on his face, passed on over the knoll. His footsteps soon ceased to be heard.

"Maow! there's a chap o' different breed," remarked Kansas Kitten, breaking the silence.

Yank shook his head gravely.

"Thar's mischief afoot," he declared.

"How so?"

"I know that red insex; he b'longs at Black Rock Bend. He's one o' the shinin' jewels Missionary Brandreth has plucked out o' the fire. Adam, Brandreth calls him, but I b'lieve his Injun name is Red Knife. I consait it's more ter the p'int. The Mission folks allow they hev driven the original sin, an' other moral meanesses, out o' Adam, an' he does look sorter peac'ble in town; but not hyar—not hyar."

"I should say he looked fierce and savage," Luke replied.

"Right enough—to be sure. I'm afeerd he means mischief."

"In what way?"

"'Twouldn't s'prise me ef he's hyar ter meet Boxshot."

"Treacherously?"

"Fur the Mission folks, yes. Ef he is hyar ter see the white scamps, it means treachery. I'm egregiously afeerd Black Rock Bend is in danger. Thar's a sprinklin' o' Injuns about, an' ef Link Boxshot lays in with them, thar is goin' ter be a heap o' triberlation an' distress."

Yank spoke quietly, but it was plain to Luke that he was not exaggerating. His unusual gravity was indicative of real concern for the forest town, so isolated, so weak, so poorly situated for help in case of a lawless uprising.

"Wait hyar," the mountaineer suddenly added. "'Tis my duty ter see ef the Injun means mischief."

He arose to go.

"Run no unnecessary risk, Nevermiss," cautioned Luke, with a full sense of the danger his ally would dare.

"I will use my faculties as wal as I kin, an' I consait all will be wal ef the atrocious newrolgy don't ketch me. Even then, my left foot may git skeered an' run me out o' danger. It cares more fur safety than fur the Yellowbird pedigree—the weak sister does."

Looking sharply to his rifle, the veteran moved away. Moses evinced a desire to go, but, for once, Yank forgot him, and the dog remained behind.

Laramie Luke awaited the result with more than ordinary interest. Danger was not new to him, but this case was growing attractive. To his original desire to see the Bend was added the matter of the Buried Treasure, the seeking of Yank's life by the outlaws, the mystery of Kansas Kitten and the danger which seemed to threaten Black Rock Bend.

Yank's steps were not less light than the Indian's. They soon ceased to be heard, and then there was silence on the knoll. But not in the forest beyond. There were sounds there which Luke, bearing the mountaineer's revelations in mind, was not at a loss to interpret.

The search was going on briskly, with an occasional signal to keep the outlaws in proper relation to each other.

The clouds of threatening trouble hung low.

Nearly half an hour had passed when quick, light steps on the side of the knoll were followed by Yank's reappearance. He came hurriedly, but was as cool as ever.

"Rise up an' scout!" the veteran exclaimed. "Boxshot has listed the Injun as trailer, an' thar is real danger now!"

CHAPTER IX.

HIDE-AND-SEEK.

KANSAS KITTEN and Luke quickly rose, but their manner was as cool as ever. The Kitten's finger sought his pulse.

"Stiddy as a clock!" he commented. "Maow! things promise ter be int'restin'. I take it the Injun knows how ter foller a trail."

"To be sure. It was born in him, an' he ain't b'en so trained as ter forget it. Boxshot's men can't tell a trail from a buffler's horn, but it's diff'rent with Red Knife. He kin foller like a dog—an' I consait thar is a good deal o' dog about him. We shall have ter dodge 'em."

"Is there prospect of a brush, Nevermiss?" Luke asked.

"I presume so, but I allow we ain't worried about it. Ef we had helpless women along it would be diff'rent; but we can laugh at 'em now. Foller me! Come on, Moses! Keep clos't ter me, dog, an' b'ar in mind you sarve the Yellowbirds now. Keep up the dignity of the family pedigree, whatever happens."

Yank led the way down the knoll with long, swift steps. The danger had brought new elements of his character to the front. The careless look was gone from his face, and gone was the humorous expression of his mouth. His steady gray eyes had grown keen, and they shot inquiring glances in all directions.

From the first he seemed to have a definite purpose in view, and he led on in a direct line until a brook, a tributary of the river, was reached. The bed was extremely rocky, with the stones nearly all of ledge-like formation, and his purpose was clear when he paused.

He looked back toward the knoll.

A chance break in the tree-tops gave them view of the elevated point they had lately left, and a group of men were seen there with Link Boxshot and Red Knife as central figures.

A grim smile passed over Yank's face.

"They expect ter ketch us—they do, by hurley!" he observed. "Wal, they ain't the fust who hev tried it. Off an' on, I've had enough atrocious insex hunt me ter make an army. Probly these chaps enjoy the hunt, an' it ain't in me ter rob 'em of any legitimate fun. We'll see how they come out. Foller me, you folks, an' don't put foot whar you'll leave a track. Step on the flat rocks, an' I defy Red Knife, Blue Knife, or any o' his tribe ter foller us. I'd feel powerful ashamed ef we let a double-faced Crow Injun outwit us."

"Maow!" coincided the Kitten. "Same with me. I'm a dogmatic feline, an' I hate ter be licked. I git my back up when I do. Keep yer pulse reg'lar, an' all will be wal."

They walked steadily down the brook. Moses was plainly averse to this mode of locomotion, but after a glance at Yank, he accepted the order of things gracefully.

The brook was a mere thread in the forest. From bank to bank it was not over five feet, and the bushes hung over the water in most places. At times they could not see to the right or left, and a collision seemed likely at any moment. If one occurred, it would be a desperate battle.

Nothing short of the death of the hunted men would satisfy Boxshot's men.

For five minutes they went on without anything being said. Then they reached another small stream, which united with the one they were following, and Yank silently turned and began to walk toward its source. Luke and Kansas Kitten exchanged glances. This was "doubling" with a vengeance, for it would take them back almost toward the enemy.

Not a word was spoken, however; they trusted to Yank's sagacity, and followed without comment.

When they reached a point in a line with the place where they had taken to the brook, at first, sounds were borne to their ears which made the mountaineer smile grimly. Human voices were heard. Obviously, the enemy were in consultation; the artifice of the pursued had shown them that an easy triumph was not to be theirs.

Nevermiss lost little time, but, going on, at last arrived at another knoll. It was the source of one branch of the stream, and a wild, rocky, broken place.

"Hyar we pause," said Yank. "I don't know of a better hidin' place. I consait they won't find us easy. Never see'd a brook yit better calkulated ter break a trail than them, an' Mister Adam Red Knife will do wal ter find us."

"Wal, I should maow!" responded the Kitten. "Art an' natur seem combined ter help us. The siteration is refreshin', an' my pulse is stiddy. I'm a dogmatic cat, but I feel like raisin' my voice cheerfully."

"You'll git inter an egregious diffikilty ef ye do, mister; it'd obleege me ter a'ply moral

asusion ter you in the shape o' a thrashin'." good-humoredly returned the veteran. "Havin' set out ter dodge the outlaws, I'm goin' ter do it. Fur their sakes, we don't want no fightin'. This game will soon be over. 'Tain't more'n an hour ter sundown, an' when it sets we'll think o' stealin' one o' Boxshot's boats an' gittin' away. Fur now, this refuge will do. It reminds me o' the place one o' my ancestors, Moses Yellowbird, hid the children o' Israel in. I don't jestly know what Israel's last name was, but he had a numerous tribe o' children, an' their step-mother abused 'em so they run away. Moses was symp'thetic, like all the Yellowbirds, an' he give 'em a lift. They had an egregious time in the wilderness, an' had ter live on scant fodder, but Moses kept hustlin' with his rifle ter git game, an' he brought 'em all through safe."

While speaking, Yank had been selecting a proper place for his party. He found it, and they sat down. The dog took position near his master, but did not once relax the vigilant air he had assumed. Yank devoted much time to watching his canine acquisition, and each moment increased his belief that Moses was a dog worth having.

The party waited patiently for darkness.

The sun sunk lower, disappeared, and night stole over the forest.

Nevermiss made no stir until it was fully dark, but before that time he had fully explained his plans to Laramie Luke and the Kitten.

Anon, they decided that it was time for the effort. They arose and left the knoll. Once on level ground, they fell into single file, with Yank at the head, Moses next, Kansas Kitten third, and Luke at the rear.

The latter did not believe that they would get through in safety. Plainly, the mountaineer's stratagem had thrown the enemy off the trail, but there was reason to believe they were still near at hand, and it would be rare good luck if there was no collision. Luke was not so very anxious to avoid such a meeting. The outlaws had seen fit to hunt them with bloodthirsty intentions, without provocation, and the young man's blood was up.

Thick as the wood was in places, it was favorable to a silent advance for skillful men, and little noise was made. Indeed, Yank seemed more like a gliding phantom than a creature of flesh, and the others did well.

They soon reached the vicinity where Boxshot and his men had before been seen. Silence reigned around them, so far as unnatural forest sounds were concerned, but each of the adventurers felt that danger was near.

Caution was redoubled, and they went on without a word.

The expected collision did not come, and Nevermiss finally paused for a moment to say that they were nearing the place where he had seen the boats.

It would soon be known whether they were to secure them.

Suddenly Yank again stopped, and as his companions came closer he spoke a few words. Looking ahead, they saw the object of his notice; a light was visible a few rods in advance, and though the view was indistinct, they knew it was that of a camp-fire.

"They're thar!" the mountaineer added, in a low voice. "You'll see all the atrocious insex squatted down like ugly toads. Let 'em squat! They can't hev our skulps ter adorn their belts with—not much, they can't! Come on, an' hold up the dignity o' yer fam'ly pedigree. Step light as snakes, an' be ready ter strike out in the same fashion."

Another hundred feet they advanced and the camp-fire was plainly seen. More than a dozen men were collected around it, and Link Boxshot's huge figure was easily discerned.

Yank stopped for no extended view, but promptly moved toward where he had seen the boats. As he came out on the bank he was pleased to see the three crafts still rocking at the water's edge. There was no sign of other men, and, after a brief pause, they went forward.

The boats were secured to the bushes with common ropes, and the mountaineer soon selected the one most suited to their use.

"I wish we could scuttle the others," he said, "but it's out o' the question. We'll leave 'em, an' trust ter luck. Hop in, you two. Yes, Moses; you go, o' course. Wouldn't think o' leavin' you, nohow. Squat down low, dog. Now we're all ready. Stiddy, an' I'll push it off!"

He made an effort, sprung in, and the boat floated clear of the bank.

"Let me row," suggested Kansas Kitten, as he gravely felt of his pulse. "I'm some with the blades. Won a race once when thar's fifteen other men entered. I came in ahead, but then, I was the only one who started."

"Take the oars," Yank directed.

The Kitten obeyed, and revealed his skill at the first dip of the blades. He caught the water well, but only a mellow gurgle revealed the fact that he was at work. Slight as the sound was it could not have betrayed them, but at that moment they were shown that the place was not unguarded.

There was a sudden stir in the bushes, and a hoarse voice broke the silence.

"Halt! Who goes thar?"

"Pull!" exclaimed Yank, in a concentrated voice.

The oars bent under Kansas Kitten's sudden effort.

"Halt! or I fire!" shouted the man on the bank.

"Crouch low!" added the mountaineer.

Then came a flash from the bushes, and a bullet whistled past the fugitives. The report of a rifle sounded sharply.

"Maow!" cried the Kitten. "Wake up an' see us! Pull the blinders off yer eyes, an' hustle fur skulps! Maow! Ma-yow-yow-yow!"

Shrill and defiant was his cry, and though Yank was annoyed that it should be so—the cry would surely be heard at the camp-fire, and, once heard, no one would fail to connect it with Kansas Kitten—but that eccentric person made amends by the way he handled the oars. He put forth every effort, and long experience with the oars enabled him to make every particle of strength tell—the boat shot forward in a way which surprised Luke.

But on the shore the now-wide-awake guard was making a great outcry. His lung-power seemed abnormal, and he was using it all to bring his companions to the scene; while answering cries from the direction of the camp-fire were followed by a crashing in the wood.

Moses thrust his nose over the edge of the boat and growled belligerently, but Yank chuckled coolly.

"Land o' Goshen! what a hornets' nest we've stirred up. They'll be as made as hurley when they find we've made off with one o' their boats."

"I should say their chances of getting it back are small," added Luke.

"I subscribe ter that idee," declared the Kitten. "I'm a dogmatic cat, an' not ter be bluffed. Ma-ow-ow-yow!"

Up the river sped their boat and the friendly darkness closed around and shielded them from all rifle-shots. They heard the other boats started in pursuit, however, and the chances of ultimate triumph were not all in their favor. Luckily for them Yank was a good oarsman, and Luke no novice, and when Kansas Kitten grew weary there was relief ready.

All were greatly pleased at the success of their last venture. Link Boxshot and his men had made war upon them without provocation, and there was a good deal of satisfaction in robbing the gang of their boat.

And so they went on through the night, bold and strong of heart. The pursuers were coming noisily, and in force, but the river and the forest stretched away before the adventurers, and fear was to them an unknown feeling.

If Link Boxshot won the struggle of the night it would be a costly victory.

CHAPTER X.

ISHMAEL TAKES ONE MORE STEP.

THE village of Black Rock Bend was situated, as the name indicated, at the bend of the river. It had been literally cut out of the heart of the forest. Originally there was no break in the trees, but a small clearing had been made, and, at the date of this narrative, the few buildings were mixed in with stumps of the felled trees.

Of these buildings the chief was the Mission. It was a long, narrow structure, built of logs, and only one story in height. From the top floated the United States flag—the only thing about the village, in outside show, which gave ornament or spirit. The Bend was a plain, practical town.

Albert Brandreth, its founder, was glad that it was so. He was a man who wanted to do good, and was not without a measure of success, but he was scarcely the man to find his way to the hearts of others, civilized or uncivilized.

With him, religion was a stern necessity. The doctrine of love was not the doctrine he preached; he tried to make converts by working upon their fears. He was a man of gravity which lacked little of gloom and sternness. In his opinion the world was extremely wicked, and growing worse every day. Trivial conversation and light laughter, in his opinion, was a sin. Had he lived in the days of the Puritans he would have been a radical; as it was, his principles were Puritanical, and he was daily overshadowed by the sense of duty to be done.

There were men and women who saw little worth copying in his rigid way of life, but all admitted that he was a just man who wished to do good. At Black Rock Bend his field of action had bidden fair to be extremely limited at the start, but in time the Mission became fairly patronized. There were nearly all the pupils he could accommodate, but, in point of fact, it was more like an ordinary school than a religious mission in one sense—nearly all the white children sent there were placed under his care to get mere worldly knowledge.

Why the Indian pupils were there it would not be so easy to say.

Mr. Brandreth was seated in his private-room—the only apartment in the Mission, proper, not given over to school purposes. He was going over a column of figures with considerable satis-

faction. It was the expense and the receipts of one quarter at the Mission, and it showed a favorable gain.

This sum he would, as usual, put out in missionary work, and the result pleased him.

A knock sounded at the door; he bade the applicant enter; and a boy came in. He was a stranger to Mr. Brandreth; a thin-faced, dark-complexioned youth whose face, the missionary thought, bore the imprint of much trouble.

The boy bowed respectfully.

"This is Mr. Brandreth, is it not?"

"Yes, sir."

"Superintendent of the Mission?"

"Exactly."

"My name, sir, is Ishmael Lee, and I am just arrived in Black Rock Bend."

The boy spoke in a low, rather sad voice, and Mr. Brandreth was favorably impressed.

"Have you friends here?"

"Not one, nor an acquaintance."

"Then I am glad you have come to me. You are in a building erected and conducted for the good of the human race, especially"—here the missionary hesitated for a moment—"for the needy and unfortunate."

"I am both," was the quick, sharp reply, as though mental trouble and pain governed the tone.

"We are always ready to help such, especially if the person is in no sense to blame for his misfortunes, and is inclined to accept aid with the understanding that it comes from man only as the latter is the servant of the great Helper."

The sentence lost none of its weight in Mr. Brandreth's ponderous utterance, and the boy's face flushed from some cause.

"I am not in need of money, sir," he quickly said. "There are other wants; I am alone in the world; none too strong and well; and I would feel, while at the Bend, that I am not friendless."

It was an opportunity Mr. Brandreth could not miss, and he went on to preach a little sermon in his gloomiest vein. He assured Ishmael Lee that if he humbled himself, forswore the vanities of the world, and did divers other things which seemed good to the stern mind of the superintendent, all would be well with him. Ishmael listened attentively, but, if Brandreth had been a close observer, he might have detected a suspicious curling of the boy's lips at this unsought advice.

His heart was not fertile soil for the reception of the seed of good.

When his discourse was over, Brandreth condescended to come down to worldly life.

"What did I understand your name to be?"

"Ishmael Lee."

"Do you live near here?"

"I did live a hundred miles, or more, west."

"Why did you leave?"

"My father and mother died of an epidemic, and, as I was left alone, I started for the settlements."

"You don't look well, yourself."

"I am wearied out. I cared for both my parents, and was nearly prostrated, myself. I need rest."

"And help?"

"No; only that I have decided to stay here for awhile and try to regain my strength; and I don't want to be a stranger. I am not overburdened with money, but have enough to pay my way. What I want is to feel at home; to have society. Knowing your life-work here, I have thus applied to you. In return for your friendship, if you will give it, I will help you about the Mission if I can."

Mr. Brandreth was favorably impressed. The worn, troubled face before him appealed to his sympathies, and Ishmael's voice and manner were quiet and respectful. The missionary's heart was not without tenderness under his severe exterior, and, believing that he saw a friendless and well-meaning boy, he was not backward.

"I am glad to help you," he responded. "I know of no way in which you can aid us, at present, but our work is to help others. We will help you. Just beyond this building is the Mission Annex, where I live with my wife and our teachers. There, too, we shelter all who need it. The Annex is open to you, and we will try to make your stay among us agreeable."

He spoke with more than usual cordiality, and Ishmael thanked him warmly.

Brandreth let no time go to waste. He conducted the boy to the Annex, and introduced him to Mrs. Brandreth—a motherly old lady, who saw the world in a better light than her husband. She took Ishmael into her charge, and then Brandreth went back to his office.

He found Steele Griffith awaiting him.

Between the two men there was friendship. Steele did not help the missionary's cause and Brandreth could not exactly forgive him, but he did not forget that Griffith was an active business man whose efforts were doing much to build up the town the former had founded; and as Steele was always very polite and plausible, the elder man thought well of him.

A general conversation followed, but Steele had come with an object, and he did not forget it.

"You haven't been to my house lately, Mr. Brandreth," he said.

"I have been very busy."

"Can't you find time now?"

"Possibly I can drop around this evening."

"I wish you would go now. I am worried about Marion, sir."

"Ah! isn't she so well?"

"It seems to me she is not."

Mr. Griffith spoke in a melancholy voice.

"She hasn't taken cold, has she?"

"No; but I am not satisfied with her condition. I tell you, Mr. Brandreth, she is delicate—very delicate."

"That is true, but I have thought her on the mend."

"So have I until lately, but it seems to me she is now failing. It may be my fancy, for when one's heart is all bound up in—"

The model husband's voice trembled, and he came to a stop.

"I understand," replied the missionary, with unusual gentleness. "I know how you are attached to Mrs. Griffith, and she is well worthy of your love."

"She is the best of women," Steele replied, in a husky voice. "How different life would be if all were like her! She is human perfection. She has been the noblest of wives, and I can think of no case where she has ever deviated from her even, perfect line of conduct. She has one of those rare natures whose greatest object is to shed sunshine upon those with whom she comes in contact. Pardon me, sir, for speaking of my private affairs, but my hopes, my plans, my happiness—even my life, is bound up in Marian!"

Tears glistened in the eyes of the model husband, and Brandreth was visibly affected. It was an excellent opportunity for him to remind his companion that he ought not to set his feelings too much upon the creatures of this world, but he lacked the heart to do it.

He expressed his sympathy for Mr. Griffith.

"However," he added, more cheerfully, "I believe that your fears are groundless, I am sure your wife has gained since she came to the Bend, and I see no reason why she should not continue to do so."

"Possibly she will, but she seems weaker than usual now, and there are grave fears in my mind."

As the model husband spoke he looked out of the window with a sad, far-away expression, but was somewhat startled to see Joseph Maynard standing there. The assistant superintendent had been listening, and the amused smile on his face seemed to indicate that he had not found the subject so melancholy as the other man.

His smile broadened as he saw that he was discovered, and, winking to Griffith, he turned away.

"That fellow is a jewel," he thought, as he went back to the main part of the Mission. "He's a born actor, and no pent-up Black Rock Bend ought to confine his abilities. Great Scott! how he was pouring the old man's ears full—and Brandreth swallowed it like the idiot he is. Ha! how he would collapse if he knew Griffith meditates poisoning his wife so he can marry Nell Stebbins!"

And Maynard chuckled as though the matter was a huge joke.

CHAPTER XI.

POWDERFOOT.

THE Mission had three teachers. Of these, Joseph Maynard and Mary Sherwin lived with the Brandreths at the Annex. Nell Stebbins only had dinner there. Her father, "Powderfoot, the Pathfinder," lived in a little house at the north side of the village, and on no condition would Nell live away from him. Besides being a Mission teacher, she took full charge of the Stebbins house, and did all the cooking, but her time was so limited at noon, that she ate at the Annex, and her father made a cup of coffee and had his dinner alone.

At noon of the day last referred to, Nell and Mary Sherwin walked together from the Mission to the Annex.

Mary was an exceedingly pretty girl. A trifle above the usual height of her sex, she had a finely-proportioned form and a beautiful face. Her cheeks were red, her eyes bright, and her dark-brown hair abundant and soft. She lacked Nellie's vivacity and outspoken bluntness, and was termed a "quiet" girl, but hers was an intelligent, well-balanced mind.

When they sat down at the dinner-table, Mr. Brandreth was for awhile unusually silent, but he finally aroused.

"We have a citizen of whom we ought to be proud in Mr. Steele Griffith."

Mrs. Brandreth agreed with him, and no one noticed how disdainfully Nell tossed her fair head.

"His devotion to his wife is touching," added the superintendent gravely.

"I have often noticed it," agreed Mrs. Brandreth.

"I haven't!" retorted Nell.

"Eh?" questioned Brandreth.

"I said I'd never noticed it."

"I don't understand, Miss Stebbins."

"Do you think Griffith will become an angel before he leaves this world?"

"Miss Stebbins, I am shocked!" the superintendent declared, and his manner confirmed his assertion.

"Oh! bother!" tersely answered the young lady.

"Such language is scandalous from any one, and from a teacher in the Mission it is shocking."

"Well, I'm tired of all this pretty talk about Griffith. I've borne it until forbearance isn't a virtue by a good deal. I don't believe the man is any more devoted to Marion Griffith than a hawk to a chicken."

"You don't know him, child."

"I know him as well as I want to."

Joseph Maynard looked straight at his plate, but he could not avoid a slight smile.

"Egad! I reckon Steele won't find it easy to marry Miss Nell when he has got rid of his present incumbrances!" thought the assistant superintendent.

"I have had a chance to observe closely," stiffly continued Brandreth, "and know that Mr. Griffith is one of the most devoted of husbands. He came to see me, to-day, and asked me to go and visit his wife, as he thought she was not so well as she had been—"

"He did!" exclaimed Nell, abruptly.

"Yes."

The girl had ceased eating, and was looking sharply at Brandreth.

"Why did he want you to call on her?"

"As a friend."

"Did you find her worse?"

"It did seem to me that she was not looking as well as she had. I fear Mr. Griffith was right. And, Miss Stebbins," severely added the old gentleman, "perhaps you would have doubted if you had seen tears stand in Steele's eyes as he told me of his fears."

"He cried, did he?"

"His eyes were moist."

"I've heard of crocodile tears!" retorted Nell.

"That will do. Really, Miss Stebbins, this must cease. Judge not, lest ye be judged. The good Book cautions us not to speak evil of one another."

"I believe it says something about hypocrites, too, but we won't pursue the subject, Mr. Brandreth. Thank you for humoring me so long. I really don't know how you can bear with my wild outbreaks."

Nell knew how to twist the superintendent around her finger, as the saying is, as well as any one, and her pretty air of penitence quelled the rising storm. After a few grave remarks of a warning nature Mr. Brandreth allowed the matter to drop, and seemed to forget what Nell had said.

Not so Joseph Maynard. That gentleman, while pretending to be busy with his dinner, studied her face secretly, but sharply. He noticed with uneasiness that she had fallen into deep thought, and his own meditations soon gave him cause for alarm. He remembered Nell's start when Brandreth stated that Griffith had told him his wife was not as well as usual, and the sharp way in which she had questioned the superintendent.

Decidedly uneasy grew Mr. Maynard.

"Can it be the little spitfire suspects anything?" he thought. "If Steele gets into trouble I am liable to get dragged into the mire, myself. I'll burn what is left of the gray powder, and tip Steele a word of caution. He's playing a neck-game, and though doing well now, it would be just the luck for him to get tripped up by a bit of a girl—and the one he aspires to marry. Nell Stebbins is dangerous!"

Whatever Nell was thinking, she kept her ideas to herself; but her thoughtful mood did not vanish until dinner ended.

"There's mischief brewing, I do believe!" muttered Joseph, viciously, as he walked back to the Mission.

The afternoon passed uneventfully.

The Mission school closed at four o'clock. That day Nell was prompter than usual about going home. Once there she burst into the house in her usual hurricane way, and promptly kissed the white-bearded old man who sat by the window—her father.

He was an impressive-looking person. Seventy years had passed over his head, and they had made their mark. His hair was perfectly white as was the heavy beard which reached low down on his breast, and the long, shaggy eyebrows which made a miniature forest there.

Once he had been famous for his strength, and it was far from being gone. He was tall and powerfully formed, with wonderful breadth of chest, heavy shoulders, and long, strong arms. He was still as erect as the average man of twenty-five years, and able to excel half his acquaintances in endurance; but he realized that he was no longer young, and the idea of retiring from border-craft, as a merchant might from business, and settle down with his charming daughter, had proved so fascinating that he had "retired" accordingly, though nearly every day he went into the woods with his rifle.

Such was Powderfoot, the Pathfinder—he thanked no man to call him by his real name, Stebbins.

The sobriquet gained during fifty years of border experience was an object of pride to him.

Nell fluttered about in her bird-like way, talking busily as she divested herself of her outer garments. Then she had a sudden recollection.

"Father Powderfoot, Yank Yellowbird has returned."

The Pathfinder looked up quickly, and a shadow passed over his face.

"Has he?"

"Yes. He didn't come alone, either. There was a funny man with him who calls himself Kansas Kitten, and imitates a cat every sentence he says; and there was a young man I just fell in love with!"

The veteran smiled.

"Did you tell him so?"

"No; but I'm going to the first chance I get. You and I are getting old, father Powderfoot, and we need some one to take care of us. We aren't very particular who, are we? We prefer a prince who is a millionaire, but we can do without the prince. But we can't do without the millions, can we?"

The girl poised her head demurely on one side and looked archly at her father.

"We must have a millionaire," she added.

"We're not a bit mercenary, father Powderfoot, but money is good to have, and we must marry rich. We are going to entrap a rich young man if we can. If we can! Why, we must! We don't like to work hard in our old age, father Powderfoot, and we should be so useful to a young millionaire to help him guard his treasures. We must have the rich young man—unless you find the Buried Treasure!"

The Pathfinder was accustomed to such buoyant talk, and he was never more pleased than when Nell indulged in her playful nonsense. He listened with a smile now until she spoke of the Buried Treasure—then his face clouded again.

"I suppose Yank Yellowbird will be arter that gold ag'in," he said, slowly.

"Didn't I tell you he was coming here this evening?"

"No."

"He is, and my prince is coming, too."

"What do they want?"

"Oh! it's about the Buried Treasure."

Powderfoot looked at vacancy, and his face bore a troubled expression.

"Confound the Buried Treasure!" he muttered.

"Bless me, there you go again! I can't understand why you are so indifferent about finding the buried gold."

"Hain't I tried, child?"

"Yes; but your heart don't seem to be in the work. Really, you ought to be more interested, father Powderfoot. You want Mary Sherwin to have what is hers by right, don't you?"

"Yes, yes; I sartinly do, child."

"And you knew her father, too."

"Yes."

The old borderer averted his face.

"Was Mr. Sherwin like Mary?"

"I—I reckon so."

"Mary says she knows he must have liked you."

Powderfoot started.

"Eh? What?"

"She thinks her father liked you. Did he?"

"Mebbe he did, child. Abraham Sherwin an' I never had no hard words. So Yank is comin' hyar to-night? I s'pose he's red-hot ter git on the track o' the Buried Treasure ag'in."

"No doubt; but that won't get our supper. That's the first treasure we want, and I'm the one to find it."

Nell hurried away to the pantry, while Powderfoot hurriedly arose and went outside the cabin. He looked down through the little village, and then away to the forest, and a heavy sigh passed his lips. Some trouble lay heavily upon the old man's mind, and it was plain that the return of Yank Yellowbird had given him no pleasure. Nell would have been startled could she have read his mind then.

CHAPTER XII.

THE STORY OF THE BURIED TREASURE.

A KNOCK sounded at Powderfoot's door, and Nell hastened to answer it. As she had expected, the applicants were Yank Yellowbird and Laramie Luke. The latter had been introduced to Nell during the afternoon, and from that time he was more than ever anxious to visit the Pathfinder's cabin.

And when they arrived and he saw the girl's bright eyes and pretty face again, he was glad that Powderfoot had located at Black Rock Bend.

Accompanied by Moses, the two men entered, and Luke was duly presented to the septuagenarian. Then all sat down. The cabin was not large, but Nell had been busy since supper, and her womanly taste and neat handiwork were discernible everywhere.

Moses had lain down near Yank, and he did not long escape Powderfoot's observing eye.

"Hallo, Nevermiss!" exclaimed the old man, "what hev ye thar?"

"What should ye say, mister?"

"Ef he's yourn, I'd rather not say, fur fear o'

hurting yer feelin's, but the dog ain't handsome."

"I consait not," good-humoredly replied Yank. "I never had but one barnsome dog, an' he was so egregious mean he'd steal his own dinner. The Yellowbirds don't go much on beauty, nohow, unless it's a pooty gal; in which case, Nell," and he waved his forefinger at the girl, "you may be sure none o' the fam'ly is at all back'ard—they ain't, by hurley!"

"Mr. Yellowbird, you ought never to speak of pretty girls when plain ones are around," Nell retorted.

"I don't," was the matter-of-fact reply. "Don't talk ter me, Nell; I'm gittin' old, an' the newroigy has injured my eyesight egregious, but I know a pooty gal when I see one. That's all I'm goin' ter say, fur I might make ye vain, an' vanity is a misdemeanor an' a crime."

The speaker looked back at Powderfoot.

"You spoke o' the dog, Pathfinder. I'll trouble ye ter observe him attentively. Moses, his name is, an' he's an orf'in. His father's dead, an' he never had no mother, an' his only brother died young. I've adopted Moses. He did me a sarvice an' I took him in, an' henceforth you'll see us around together when we're both at hand. Pathfinder, we had an egregious triberlation down the river."

"Not Injuns?"

"No; leastways, not red Injuns. They was white ones, an' mean insex, too. Tried ter slaughter us off-hand, but we got inter a boat an' ran away from 'em."

Powderfoot's face had lighted up as it always did when scenes of danger and deeds of valor were spoken of, and they had to pause and tell him of their adventures with Link Boxshot's men. Yank made the story as brief as he could and not disappoint the Pathfinder.

There was nothing to tell from the time we left them on the river, except that, by the aid of darkness and speed, they escaped the outlaws without further trouble.

Powderfoot listened with sparkling eyes, but, at the end, shook his head gravely.

"I've see'd the time when all this would please me, an' I'd like ter go out an' give them scamps a lesson, but I'm properly off the war-path now, an' when I hear o' lawless men about, I remember I have a darter."

He glanced at Nell as he spoke.

"An' a most egregious pooty one!" declared Yank.

"Come, come, mountaineer, I can't allow this," said Nell, laughing. "You know I never believe anything you say, and even if I did, what are empty compliments?"

"I consait it depends upon who they come from," dryly observed Nevermiss. "As fur me, I'll leave it ter Laramie Luke if I libeled ye."

"Miss Stebbins has only to consult her mirror, and she will find your statement verified," Luke replied. "And, while I have the floor, so to speak, let me say, in regard to the danger referred to by friend Powderfoot, that if any harm comes to Miss Nell, I know of one volunteer who would gladly go to her aid."

For once, at least, Nell blushed—her "prince" was not at all backward.

The Pathfinder, however, took matters soberly, and formally thanked Luke.

"We've got that settled," added Yank, "or," he amended, with a sly glance at the young people, "it bids fair ter be settled, I consait; so let us come right ter business. What o' the Buried Treasure, Pathfinder?"

"Nothin' new."

Powderfoot did not look at Yank as he answered.

"Didn't know but some combustion o' the 'arth had flung it up, an' landed it right at yer door. Now, hyar is Luke Winchester, who I've took inter partnership with me, an' he wants ter hear the story o' the Buried Treasure. Link Boxshot an' his men chased us so fast I didn't hev time ter explain ter him, an' I'd like you ter do it, Pathfinder."

The old borderer was silent for a moment, and then all signs of wavering disappeared.

"I suppose, take it from end ter end, I kin tell more about it than any one else," he began. "It was this way, you see. Twenty-four years ago I was huntin' in the hills up nor'west o' hyar when I come onter sure signs o' gold. I was a novice, but ef I's blind I could scarcely hev failed ter know thar was pay-dirt thar."

"Now, most men would 'a' gone at that gold like wildfire, but I didn't. I wa'n't married then, an' didn't expeck ter be, an' I was as keerness o' the future as any wanderer o' the West. I let the gold stay, but was foolish enough ter mention it in the settlements, whar upon I soon had a bull crowd o' men arter me, wantin' ter know the exact spot whar I had seen the pay-dirt."

"Fur a long time I didn't give nobody satisfaction, but, finally two men named Abraham Sherwin an' Ralph Short did me a favor, an' follered it up by coaxin' me ter guide 'em to the place. I did it. I still scorned the gold, myself, but they was anxious, an' I did 'em a favor ter pay fur the one they did me."

"I guided 'em ter the place whar the gold was."

The narrator paused for a moment, and his

mind seemed to go back vividly to that long vanished day, but he soon resumed:

"I only stayed with 'em a couple days, but was long enough ter see them haulin' in gold like all creation; then I p'inted fur a region a hundred miles away, wonderin' at the hold gold bad onter men, an', myself, only carin' ter hunt wild game an' lead a free life."

"The gold-diggers was left in an uncommon wild place. The place whar the gold was is wild ter this day, an' all the region along hyar was then without a human habitation. They war in danger from the reds, but the woods furnished food enough fur fifty times their number."

"Wal, I never seen them ag'in. Two years passed. Now an' then I thought on 'em, an' wondered how they was gettin' along, but allowed they had most likely quit long afore, successful or unsuccessful. As I said, two years passed. Then my wand'rin' feet happened ter take me inter this vicinity ag'in, an' I brought up at a small place called Red Oak, about fifty mil'd down the river. I was allowin' ter 'vestigate the gold-diggers, but when I'd b'en at Red Oak a few days somethin' unexpected happened."

"Two o' the citizens brought inter town a third man they had found jest outside, wounded an' nigh his death. He had b'en pluckily makin' his way along with a bullet in his side, but he'd clean give out."

"That man was Ralph Short, one o' the gold-diggers."

"Before I knowed o' the case he was dead, but afore he went over the divide he had tol' the story o' the two years in the mountains. He said he an' Sherwin had kep' at it all the time, an' their luck had b'en amazin'. Jest how much gold they gathered I dunno, but there was all sorts o' accounts arterwards. One account said Short had claimed that their three hosses had b'en loaded with gold so heavy that the animals c'u'd only walk five mil'd a day with it, an' the owners had walked all the way from the mountains. I won't tire ye with the other versions, but all agreed that a rich treasure had b'en found—an' lost."

"Yas, it was lost, an' has been ever sence. It come about in this way:

"I tol' ye Short had a bullet-hole in his side, an' now fur the rest o' his story. He said he an' Sherwin, his pardner, was homeward bound when they was set upon by four or five men, who 'tacted them without warnin'. Short was shot down at the fu'st fire, but Sherwin run away. All the gang pursued, an' Short was left alone—dead, the gang supposed. He was still alive, but sore wounded; but even then his mind turned onter the treasure."

"How could he save it?"

"Their camp had b'en in a ravine, whar the bottom o' the place was full o' rents an' crevices. Short took all the bags o' gold an' dropped 'em inter one o' these holes—a place 'tween two fixed rocks—an' kivered them up with gravel an' sand, an' scattered dry leaves over all."

"By the time he had it done his strength was all gone, an' he crawled inter a thicket an' fainted dead away. When he come to, the outlaws—or whoever they was—were back, an' Sherwin's dead body laid on the ground. Short's story—remember I didn't see him while he lived—didn't make it plain what follered in camp, nor whuther the murderers took the loss o' the gold coolly. It may be they didn't know thar was any gold in the case—I don't know how 'twas."

"Anyhow, Short said they finally went off, an' then he crept out o' the thicket. The murderers had stolen all the hosses except one which they had wounded in the leg, an' lamed, when they made their 'tact. Wal, Short buried Sherwin in a crevice nigh the gold—he took a look at the gold ter be sure 'twas thar—an' then, decidin' that the wounded hoss was too bad hurt ter carry extra load, he mounted it an' rode on."

"He allowed he would git help an' go back fur the treasure, but it wa'n't so ter be. Ez I hev said, he died o' his hurts, an' left only the legend o' the Buried Treasure."

"Now comes the rub."

"He said the spot whar the gold was buried was called Dark Ravine, an' as the spot was knowed ter many men, thar was a rush fur the place at onc't. All was eager ter get the buried gold. But they didn't git it—no, sir. Dark Ravine is over a mil'd long, an', in the six months that follered, the bottom on't got a most tremenjous upheaval. No gold was found, though, an' no sign o' Abraham Sherwin's body. It has never b'en found, so fur as is knowed. Diggin' went on fur two years, off an' on, an' then it was give up."

"Within the last year, hows'ever, the fever broke out ag'in. The idee o' thousands o' dollars up thar som'ers, all bagged up an' ready fur market, was enticin', an' the bottom o' Dark Ravine has b'en dug up ag'in. Failin' ter find it, folks hev settled on an opinion I give long ago. Wa'n't Ralph Short mistook when he said all this happened in Dark Ravine? Didn't he git some other place confused with it?"

"This is the p'int ter be settled. Some folks hev advanced the idee that Short lied, an' that he was no better than he ought ter be, hisself. I b'lieve he tol' the truth. He an' Sherwin both

'peared ter be honest men. Next, didn't the murderers find the gold an' steal it? Some folks sez yes; I say, no. Short said Sherwin's body was buried nigh the gold, an' the body was never found.

"Nigh about ev'ry one l'ieves that the gold still lays whar Short put it, an' in the gin'ral fever for it which has sprung up, the s'arch is made fur an' wide. Other ravines hev b'en looked at, an' the work goes on, but, up North ravines are about as thick as 'skeeters. Which one was Short in when he wrongly thought he was in Dark Ravine? That is the great conundrum.

"All these gold-hunters but one has selfish motives. Friend Yellowbird, hyar, knows that Mary Sherwin, the teacher in the Mission, is darter o' the Abraham Sherwin who was half-owner o' the gold, an' Nevermiss allows that the gal ought ter hev it. He's right, too. An' Yank has sat out ter find the Buried Treasure without one selfish motive, but jest simply ter give Mary Sherwin her due."

CHAPTER XIII. THE SPY.

THE old borderman ceased speaking and looked at Yank Yellowbird with friendly eyes.

"I coudn't I can't occupy my time better," Nevermiss modestly replied. "At least one-half o' the gold b'ongs in the Sherwin family, an' Mary is as deservin' a piece o' femininity as kin easily be found. Then my time ain't wu'th no great shakes, as I'm an idle wanderer."

"Twas so with me onc't, but I lived ter be sorry fur my folly," said Powderfoot. "I might 'a' had all that gold, an' I let it slide; then, soon arter Short died, I met the woman who became the mother o' my Nell. I wished then I'd b'en less keener, happy-go-lucky an' prodigal in the past, but it was too late. My one chance ter be rich was gone; the treasure was lost."

"But you've got one treasure, an' an egregious pooty one," interrupted Yank, nodding to Nell.

"Right you be, pardner!" the Pathfinder exclaimed.

"Nonsense!" cried the girl. "I wish you two would not talk such folly; you don't mean it, and I know you don't. Now, confine yourself to the buried gold; I want to do some talking anon, and this matter is too deep for my poor head. Mr. Winchester, say something sensible—do!"

"I will try and deserve your intimation that I can do so," answered Luke, smiling. "By the way, Powderfoot, it occurs to me that a better way than to look for gold hidden nobody knows where, would be to proceed to where it was dug and engage in legitimate mining there."

"A good idee, but I've tried it. I'm the only man, save one, who knows whar the gold was dug. I went thar when Nell was a baby and tried ter find gold. I failed. Then I took a veteran miner in with me, an' we went together; an' we stayed three months, an' tore up a heap o' ground. But it was no good; we didn't get twenty-five dollars' worth o' the stuff; an' the old prospector tol' me thar was no doubt that Sherwin an' Short had exhausted the supply. Thar are men, ter-day, who think thar is pay-dirt left, an' they want me ter tell the secret o' the mine, bad."

"I know one," said Luke.

"Who?"

"Link Boxshot."

"The outlaw you tol' me about. Wal, he'll have ter take it out in wantin'."

"But he vows he will kidnap you, and force you to tell the secret."

"Let him try!" retorted Powderfoot.

"I should advise you to use caution."

"I will."

"Boxshot is a desperate man, and he has a score of lawless followers at his back. Beware of him!"

"Thank ye, kind an' hearty, for your caution. I'll look out; but ef he molests me, he'll find these arms ain't lost all their power."

The septuagenarian stretched out the muscular members to which he referred, exhibiting excusable pride.

"An' now as ter Mary Sherwin," he added. "Yank has set out ter git the Buried Treasure fur her, an' I'm goin' ter help him all I kin. Afore Short died he said plainly that he didn't leave no heir, so I reckon Mary kin claim all. As I said, she is Abraham Sherwin's darter. He was an adventurous young man who was anxious ter git rich. He left his wife an' baby-girl in the East an' started out ter make his fortune. Now, Mary is all that is left o' the fam'ly. She has drifted that way, an' ef the luried gold kin be restored ter her, it ought ter be done."

"Pathfinder," pursued Luke, after a pause, "have you any idea who killed Abraham Sherwin?"

He tried to make his manner careless, but he could not wholly succeed. His mind went back to the paper he had picked from the river; the document claimed by Kansas Kitten. This singular paper he would probably never read now, if, as he believed, the Kitten had burned it, but he remembered the impressive beginning:

"Instructions to Detective Locke: You will proceed at once to Black Rock Bend, and spare no efforts, or expense, to find the murderer of Abraham Sherwin—"

Incomplete as was his information, it seemed to be a settled fact that the two Sherwins were one and the same person. A detective has been sent to the Northwest to solve the mystery of years. Who had sent him? Who, after all these years, had aroused interest in the case?

It was Luke's object to learn if any one at the Bend knew of the matter.

Powderfoot was slow with his reply.

"That p'int has never b'en settled," he finally answered. "It was the gin'ral theory that rovin' cut-throats did the job, an' it looks likely. Anybody who knew about the gold, an' did the job with premeditation, would never 'a' let their minds wander from the gold."

"That is logic," Luke admitted. "Do you think there is any hope of learning who did the deed?"

The Pathfinder shook his head.

"No; the day fur that is past."

"Have detectives ever been put on the case?"

"Not as I know."

"Does any one here ever suggest it now?"

"I never have heard it suggested."

"No; I'm afeerd it's a dead secret," Yank added. "Ef a man is killed hyar in the wild woods, he's either avenged by his friends or it goes undone. Detectives are skeerce up this way. Besides, what could a detective do now?"

"True."

Luke spoke mechanically; he was wondering what Kansas Kitten would do.

"I'd like ter know the atrocious insex who did the job," pursued Yank, with emphasis. "It's an egregious mean thing ter rob a miner, or a trapper, or a hunter, o' his goods an' chattels—especially his chattels. The man who labors hard in the wild woods, or mountains, or prairie, with no company but Nature an' his Creator, ought ter be exemp' from the makeanitions o' envious feller bein's. I hate a robber an' a sneak—I do, by hurley!"

The mountaineer brought his broad hand forcibly down on his knee to emphasize his remarks, causing Moses to start up in momentary fear of a greater outbreak.

"Your ideas are correct, Nevermiss," Luke returned.

"They sartainly be," added Powderfoot.

"I never stole nothin' but once, an' then I repented right off," continued Yank, a humorous gleam in his eyes. "The article of klistomany was the affections o' a young gal, an' I coudn't I did wrong; but I's jest gittin' over the pitchfork fever, an' I had some mental adulation. When I realized what I'd done, I offered ter give 'em back ter the gal, but she said no, an' seemed reel put out by the affair; an' I'll be thrashed ef she didn't bring me inter court on a breach o' promise suit."

"Twas the wu'st triberlation I's ever in, an' as I stood up ter the felon's dock the p'rasperation stood all over me like roseberries, an' the egregious newrolgy raged so I thought I'd holler right out loud."

"The o'posin' lawyer scowled at me like a pirate."

"You're a perfiddeus wretch!" sez he.

"I coudn't so," sez I.

"You stole the heart o' a young woman, an' broke it," sez he, savager than ever.

"Can't it be mended?" sez I. "Glue is good."

"Onhuman monster!" sez he, holdin' up both hands.

"Don't be too hard on me," sez I, beginnin' ter blubber.

"Hain't ye no conscience?" sez he.

"I have," sez I; 'an' I've got the newrolgy voy'lent, too. Betwixt 'em both, I'm in the condemnedest pain you ever seen—I be, by hurley!"

"An' what," sez he, 'o' the hapless gal you allured on with yer honeyed speech, an' led ter give her promise to go with you ter Hymen's sacred altar?"

"I dont know Hymen," sez I, 'an' thar wa'n't no honey give or took, while as fur the altar," sez I, indignantly, 'ef we're ter set up altars an' have burnt off'rins, as they did in the days o' Sham, Ham an' Jayfits, it's time ter close up the tavern."

"My dispute with the egregious lawyer went on fur some time, but the jedge finally took a hand in the case, an' the gal was made ter say that a money consideration would lift some o' the woe off'n her blighted heart, an' I bought her off fur five dollars, a second-hand fiddle an' a goat. Then I skipped for the woods, an' ain't never b'en back sence."

Laramie Luke had waited patiently for the conclusion of this alleged recollection.

"As usual, you showed good judgment, Nevermiss," he commented. "And now, I will say that, being an idle wanderer in the West, I should be pleased to join you and the Pathfinder in our attempt to find the Buried Treasure."

"We'll welcome you right hearty. Eh, Powderfoot?"

"I am satisfied," was the reply. "Let the young man in."

"I dare say you have some definite plan."

"Yes," Powderfoot admitted. "It is my idee that we must look fur a ravine a good bit like

Dark Ravine. Short made a blunder, an' I reckon it was due ter a resemblance. Now, ef we find a ravine a good 'eal like Dark Ravine, we may find the gold. It's b'en tried afore, but, as I said, thar's a good many ravines up that way."

"They're thick as hurley," Yank agreed.

"I suppose your idee is to form a party, consisting of us three or more, and go to work in a systematic way."

"To be sure, but thar'll be only us three along—"

Yank suddenly ceased speaking. Moses had uttered a menacing growl and started up from the floor, his gaze fixed upon the window at the north side of the room. Yank flashed a glance that way, and he was just in time to see a human head disappearing.

The mountaineer leaped to his feet.

"A spy!" he exclaimed; and with three long steps he gained the door, tore it open and disappeared in the darkness.

Laramie Luke quickly followed. He saw that the window was up slightly at the bottom, and whoever was there could have overheard what they said easily. Obviously, too, the unknown had listened intentionally, and the only questions were—who was he, and how much had he heard?

Reaching the open air the young man looked sharply around, but nothing was to be seen. He heard footsteps, however, and, turning the corner, saw Yank and Moses running through the village. He followed, and endeavored to overtake them, but was soon brought to the rather humiliating discovery that he could not gain an inch upon the tall mountaineer.

The chase was not long, however.

The walls of the Mission soon loomed up, and there he found Nevermiss and the dog.

"He's gone in hyar," said Yank, coolly.

"You stay hyar, an' I'll go ter the other side."

He hastened away, and Luke fixed his gaze on the open window. Having been inside the Mission, he knew that it led to Albert Brandreth's private room. It looked very much as though the spy was caged, and he kept his place and watched diligently. He soon heard voices in the main room, and then Yank and Brandreth appeared in the office, the latter bearing a lamp. The mountaineer had his rifle ready, and they evidently expected to unearth an interloper at once. They looked around, but no human being besides themselves was in the place.

Yank fell to stroking his sparse beard in perplexity.

"Wal, by hurley, this is s'prisin'! he declared. "I've b'en witness ter a good many meracles—thar's b'en meracles in the Yellowbird family ever sence my first ancestor, Adam, married Eve Smith—an' it seems they ain't over yit. It's egregious funny—an' not so funny as queer, neither. I seen the man come in hyar plain."

"It seems almcst impossible that he could pass through the large room, and I not hear him," added Brandreth.

"It does, I coudn't, but that's the only way to explain it. He's a soft-footed insex, whoever he is. Wal, I hate ter give up beat, but thar ain't no denyin' that he's got away from me."

The mountaineer exhibited considerable annoyance.

"I won't trouble you funder," he resumed, after a pause, "but ef ye hear o' the sly critter, let me know. I'd like to have a bit o' an argyment with him, based on the same cardigan principles with which my mother used ter reason with me when I's a boy. Possibly I might prodoce some irritation o' his hide, ef I didn't break my ramrod afore I made the p'int clear ter his on'nerstandin'."

Yank cast another regretful glance around, and then went out to rejoin Laramie Luke.

CHAPTER XIV.

A DANGEROUS VISITOR.

ON that evening Steel Griffith's store was closed at an hour earlier than usual. Trade had been rather dull, but it was by no means past the hour of expecting more when Steel told Nat Westcott and the other helper that they could go home. He breathed a sigh of relief when the door closed after them, turned the key, and then went to his private desk. From this he took a partially-filled flask and drank generously of its contents.

This done he began to pace the room with slow, thoughtful steps.

Clearly he had something upon his mind, and the thoughtful scowl which accompanied his meditations did not indicate that the subject was pleasant. He finally went again to the desk, brought out a folded paper and sat down at a table.

Unfolding the paper, he spread it out carefully. It was covered with figures, lines and irregular marks which would have been unintelligible to one who had no knowledge of its nature, and they were little less so to Steele.

He scowled at the paper as though it had done him a personal injury.

"Confound the thing!" he muttered. "I am tempted to burn it up. What does it amount to, anyway? As a guide it is a dismal failure. If I dared take a good man into my confidence I dare say there would soon be light, but where

can I get him? Naturally, Yank Yellowbird would be the best of all men, but he is the last in the world to be consulted. He's too infernal scrupulous, and then, again, he is the man of all men whom I fear most.

With an impatient movement he drew the paper closer to him and began to study it. It was clearly the work of a man not skilled in drawing diagrams, though it might be more ingenious than was at first apparent. One thing it was, and Steele realized the fact to his sorrow; it was blind. Carefully he dwelt upon the lines, straight and irregular—there were both—and upon the figures.

"Worse than a Chinese puzzle!" he exclaimed, viciously. "It's plain that I must take some experienced woodman into my confidence, or Yank will carry off the Buried Treasure and leave me nothing. These corkscrew marks are plainly intended to represent rivers, or brooks, but where in perdition are they? '10 w., 5 n.,' and then more hieroglyphics. The 'w' and the 'n' doubtless mean west and north, but what of the '10,' and the '5,' and the other things? Ten miles, or rods, or yards, or feet? I'll be shot if I know!"

He plunged his hands into his pockets and sat looking scowlingly at the chart.

Mr. Griffith was another man afflicted with the fever for the Buried Treasure, and he seemed to possess an advantage over the others.

He had a chart which, if he could understand it, was supposed to give him accurate directions for finding the coveted gold, but it was wholly unintelligible. If he dared take some one into his confidence who was well acquainted with the woods, and could distinguish the various rivers on the map one from another, he might, by experimenting with the figures, finally locate the Buried Treasure.

"And I've got to do it," he decided. "I may study this villainous thing until I grow gray with age, and never be any wiser. I've got to join forces with a woodsman—but who? Not Yellowbird or Powderfoot. Even if they were not interested in another direction, their so-called 'honor' would prevent. My ally must be a rascal!"

A bitter smile swept over his face.

"I'm afraid I shall show my hand before I get away from the Bend, but if my present schemes work, I'll reform and live uprightly. I'd like to marry Nell Stebbins and be a good man!"

There would have been something grotesque and comical in this assertion did it not convey, as it did, his intention to finish the infamous work he had begun with the gray powder. The shadow of contemplated murder robbed the speech of all that was comic.

Griffith started as a knock sounded at the door.

"Who is there?" he asked.

"A customer," was the reply.

"What do you want?"

"Ammunition, and several other things."

Steele was about to refuse to open the door when he had a sudden idea. He wanted a woodsman for an ally—possibly he would find just the person in this applicant. He did not recognize the voice.

Bidding the unknown wait a little, he replaced the chart in the desk and locked it up. Then he opened the door and a man walked in; a stranger to the storekeeper. The latter was not pleased with the appearance of his visitor. He was a heavily-bearded man, with long, shaggy hair; and the way in which the rim of his hat was tipped down over his eyes was not agreeable in a late caller. The latter, however, was considerably smaller of frame than Griffith, and when he spoke in a mild voice Steele banished his doubts.

"Half a pound of powder, if you please," said the stranger. "Give me the best you have. I want a box of caps, too."

Steele went to fill the order, while his customer sat down at the table carelessly. When the package was ready Steele brought it to the table and received his pay.

"Won't you sit down?" asked the stranger. "My name is Hague, and I'm a stranger in town. I'd like a few points."

Pleasant enough were his voice and manner, and Steele sat down accordingly.

"I dare say I can help you."

"I think of locating here, with my family."

"You'll find it a good place."

"And growing?"

"Every day. We've struck our boom, and now we are going ahead rapidly."

"I take it you are from the East. If so, you can advise me better."

"I am from the East—from Indiana."

"Ah! I imagined as much. I once heard of a Steele Griffith who lived in Richmond, that State."

A shade of annoyance swept over Steele's face.

"There are probably several of my name."

"Yes; it is a common one," dryly answered Mr. Hague. "The man to whom I refer was some years ago mixed up in an affair with a girl named Constance Hammond."

The listener started perceptibly, and shot a glance at Hague which was half-alarmed, half-threatening.

"Probably he was one of the numerous persons bearing your name," steadily added Hague.

"I don't know the man. I never was in Richmond; I hail from Vincennes."

"You are lucky not to be a relative of the other Steele Griffith," pursued Hague, quietly, as he leaned back in his chair and seemed wholly undisturbed. "He was a rascal. I say it boldly, for I knew him pretty well. I doubt if he would recognize me, however; the passage of years changes us all a good bit, and I was young then."

"Yes," said Griffith, mechanically.

He knew not what else to say. He was looking keenly at his visitor, or what little was visible of him, and longing to lift the baffling hat and secure a better view.

"The other Steele Griffith fell in love with Constance Hammond," continued Hague, "or he thought he did. His was a weather-vane-like mind. A fair face always caught his fancy, and he loved passionately for a while. Unluckily for those he fancied, there was poison in his love; there was not one element of good about him, and any unscrupulous act he could perform to win was never prevented by his scruples. He had none. Yet, singularly enough, every girl he fancied threw him over and married somebody else."

"Why do you tell me this?" harshly demanded Griffith, upon whose face a dark, threatening look had settled.

"You naturally recall the case."

"Do I look like the other Steele Griffith?"

"Oh! no."

Steele drew a breath of relief.

"But let me resume. The subject of our recollections was very much in earnest when he wooed Constance Hammond, and he swore to win her—but he didn't. She married another man."

Griffith ground his teeth with an audible sound.

"He lost her, but one thing he secured—revenge. And this is how he did it. He was resolved to have the unfortunate woman, anyway, and at the expiration of two years, he saw his chance. Constance then had a child, and her husband was away. Griffith determined to abduct Constance. He secured the co-operation of the keeper of a private mad-house, and Constance was seized by those human brutes. She was never carried to her prison, however; overcome with terror, she died of heart-disease within the hour!"

Hague paused, and looked straight at his companion. All Steele's self-possession had deserted him. His face was pallid, and perspiration oozed out on his forehead.

"At that time," the visitor went on, "Griffith was only twenty-one years of age. Time has passed and he is now past forty. Long years has Constance slept in her grave, and her daughter is now grown to womanhood. Oddly enough, she is now in this place; her name is Mary Sherwin. Here, too, is Steele Griffith, and—you are he!"

The speaker's voice had grown harder, sharper, as he went on, and the last words were fairly hurled at the listener like the hiss of a snake.

Steele started to his feet, his eyes blazing.

"By heavens!" he hoarsely cried, "how dare you!"

"I dare because I am not afraid of you; because I know you well; because I am able to care for myself. And you may as well spare me vain denials. I know you well; I know the infamous life you have led; and I am not afraid to come here and tell you of it!"

Hague seemed to speak the truth. He met Steele's angry glare with eyes which never wavered.

"And who are you?" gasped the accused man.

"Your enemy!"

"Ay, but your name—your name!"

"No matter."

"Do you refuse to tell it?"

"Yes."

"By heavens, I'll know it, whether or no!"

Suddenly bending forward Steele made an effort to reach the wide-rimmed hat and tear it from Hague's head, but he did not reach it. Quicker than his motion the stranger's arm arose; a knife flashed in the lamp-light; and the blade was driven through Griffith's arm with one resistless sweep.

A furious imprecation fell from the stricken man's lips, and he staggered back, clasping the wound with his free hand. Hague had withdrawn the knife, and stood holding it nonchalantly. Red drops began to fall from the tips of Griffith's fingers.

"You had better go home and have the arm bound up," Hague carelessly observed. Then, seeing his companion glance toward the desk, he added in a sterner voice: "Don't do it, sir; I, too, carry a revolver, and I'll use it if you make a hostile move."

"Who, in the fiend's name, are you?" burst from the pale lips of the wounded man.

"Your enemy! That is enough for you to know now, but don't worry for fear you won't see me again. You will. I shall watch you! And, one word in your ear, sir; don't try to do harm to Mary Sherwin. She is ignorant of her

mother's unhappy end, and of the fact that she owes you a debt of hatred, but there is one here who knows all. If you raise a hand in enmity against Mary, beware! Take heed as to your future, for I shall be watching you!"

Steele Griffith had sunk into a chair. Blood was now flowing freely, and he felt weak and faint.

Hague smiled derisively.

"You don't bear it well, but villains are usually cowards. I'll give you a chance to go for help by taking myself off, but don't think you've seen the last of me; I shall be near you when you least expect it. Farewell!"

With quick, light steps Hague left the store. He expected to hear Griffith give the alarm, but no sound arose. Hague hastened away, but not many yards had he gone when he removed his hat and plucked off a wig and a false beard.

The smooth face of Ishmael Lee was revealed!

He concealed his disguise by the river-bank, and then went on to the edge of the forest. He had barely reached that point when a man came out of the bushes and greeted him curtly.

The new-comer was Link Boxshot.

CHAPTER XV.

KANSAS KITTEN'S ALIBI.

THE following morning there were two invalids in Steele Griffith's house. Mrs. Griffith was weak and feverish, and so was the "model husband," but his case was quite different from hers.

He had gone straight to Joseph Maynard to have his wounded arm cared for, and had troubled no one at home until morning. Very little had he slept that night, but the wound was not wholly responsible for the fact; he had not lost enough blood to make trouble, nor was the hurt likely to prove serious.

His mental condition was less favorable.

All that night he had tossed about on his bed, and brief intervals of sleep were separated by long periods when he could only think of his startling visitor of the evening. Try as he would, he could not sleep. He foresaw ruin staring him in the face. He had been a model citizen, but now one person, at least, knew a disgraceful page of his past, and there was enough in its train to startle him.

No wonder that he could not sleep, beset as he was by his meditations and the pain of his arm.

He was not cowed, and strong was his desire to strike back at the visitor. But who was he? Beyond doubt the name, Hague, was false, and its claimant in disguise. Who, then, was he? Griffith considered all the men of the village, but not one seemed to fill the requirements of the case. But there were some new-comers, and he turned them over in his mind until he had an idea.

The more he reflected upon it the more plausible it grew, and he finally decided that he had Hague identified. This conclusion arrived at, he determined to waste no time, but strike promptly the following day.

Mrs. Griffith was shocked when she came down to breakfast and found her husband with his arm in a sling. She had heard him moving in his room during the night, but had not suspected anything serious.

He had a good story to tell; a desperado had gained entrance to the store and tried to rob him. He had beaten the fellow off, but, before he did so, his wound was received. All this sounded plausible, and she did not think of doubting his word; on the contrary, she gave her genuine sympathy.

Steele was in a vicious mood, and he felt like swearing at her for her kind words, but he managed to conquer his wrath, outwardly, and hastened to play the old role.

"Don't let us speak of my trivial hurt, dear," he said, anon. "What of yourself? How did you rest?"

"I had a bad night," was the weary reply.

"That's unfortunate."

"I don't sleep so well of late, Steele. I am feverish, restless and nervous."

"You ought to have some morphine, or some other sedative."

"I don't believe in them."

"A turn of the weather will make you all right; I've felt oppressed, myself, of late. This is only a transient drawback; you'll soon be all right. I want you to make haste, so you can get out into the woods, and on the river. That's what will do you good, and I want to see you as strong as you were in the old days. You're going to be, too, dear; you must; it breaks my heart to see you ill."

Deeply pathetic was Griffith's voice, and Marion was very much touched; she did not think of doubting his sincerity.

He finished breakfast first, and then went upstairs.

"I've got to hurry up this business," he muttered, "and I reckon if the amber-hued cordial is made a little stronger it will be more efficacious."

From his pocket he took the powder Maynard had given him, and a liberal quantity was poured into Mrs. Griffith's medicine. Troubled

as his mind was on other matters he felt sufficiently satisfied on this one point to smile triumphantly. Having thoroughly mixed the powder with the medicine he went down-stairs, kissed his wife, and left the house.

He went at once to the Mission and was soon closeted with Mr. Brandreth. Their interview lasted nearly half an hour, and when they came out they first added Maynard and another man to their number, and then went to the semi-hotel of which mention has been made.

They entered the main room and found four men present, one of whom was Kansas Kitten. Mr. Brandreth's grave face grew graver yet at sight of him, but he went forward resolutely.

"We have come to see you, sir," he began.

"Maow!" responded the Kitten. "It's an honor I didn't expect, but I'm proud to see ye. I'm a dogmatic feline, but I bow my head to the first man o' the town. Proud an' happy to see ye, Mr. Brandreth."

"Never mind the complimentary words."

"Eh?"

"We have come on serious business."

Kansas Kitten gravely felt of his pulse.

"Go on; I kin bear it," he placidly replied.

"Last night, at nine o'clock," said Brandreth sternly, his doubts a good deal dissipated by the Kitten's light manner, "a lawless act was committed in our town. A thief gained entrance to Mr. Griffith's store as a late customer, and, once in, attempted robbery. A struggle followed between him and Mr. Griffith, and the latter received a stab-wound in the arm."

Steele became the object of general attention. "The thief was foiled," Brandreth continued, "but a far greater crime than robbery was attempted. Only a Divine interposition saved Mr. Griffith's life, and, as I before said, he has a bad wound. We are looking for the criminal."

"Maow! kin I help you?" Kansas Kitten asked.

"You can, sir."

"Tell me how, an' you'll find me right on deck."

"We will. Are you the guilty man?"

"Me?"

"You, sir!"

"Wal, now, I like a joke, but—"

"This is no joke. Mr. Griffith believes that he recognized the robber to be you, and, unless you can prove your innocence, we shall be obliged to put you under arrest."

The Kitten looked the picture of astonishment.

"You don't mean it," he protested.

"We certainly do, sir. I would not lend myself to a joke on such a serious subject, believe me. I am exceedingly sorry to be obliged to approach you in such a way, and if you can prove your innocence, I shall be glad. Mr. Griffith, however, is next to positive that he recognized you, and, as the dignity of the law must be preserved here, I am forced to act. Unless you can prove your innocence, sir, I must place you under arrest for criminal assault upon Mr. Griffith with intent to kill."

By this time there was a somewhat large and very interesting crowd who were following the course of events. Several other men had come in, and all listened eagerly.

Kansas Kitten was the only person not on his feet. He kept his seat and did not look alarmed, but his broad face bore a bewildered look. Somehow, too, he did not appear as intelligent as usual.

He stared blankly into Brandreth's face.

"Thunderation! I don't ketch on at all!" he exclaimed.

"Didn't I speak plainly?"

"Yas; but I ain't touched nobody."

"Can you prove it?"

"Wal, I dunno."

"Why do you waste words with the fellow?" impatiently asked Griffith. "Can't you see he is guilty?"

"I think, Kansas Kitten," added Brandreth reluctantly, "that you will have to come along with us—unless you can promptly prove your innocence."

"He can do so!"

The words came in a new, clear voice, and Ishmael Lee stepped to the front. His manner was quiet and cool, and he met Brandreth's gaze unwaveringly.

"Can't you see, sir," he continued, "that your charge has alarmed and dazed the Kitten? He hasn't found his tongue yet, but justice demands that others find theirs. He can prove his innocence, and by me. You say that the robbery took place at nine o'clock. Well, sir, at that hour, and, in fact, from eight until ten, I was with Kansas Kitten in his room. He did not leave it!"

Pleasantly and frankly Ishmael made this statement, and a hush fell upon the group.

The sudden turning of the scales influenced those who had no selfish motive, and they saw Griffith's face grow downcast and annoyed.

"Is this, indeed, so?" asked Brandreth, with an air of relief.

"Yes, sir. I met Mr. Kansas Kitten; he asked me to his rooms; and I passed a trifle over two hours there. It was half-past ten when I reached the Mission Annex; it must have been quarter after when I left the Kitten."

"Then he can't be guilty."

"Certainly not, Mr. Brandreth. He is almost a total stranger to me, but I am always ready to speak in the interests of justice. As Kansas Kitten was with me, he can't have been at Mr. Griffith's store."

"Maow! I should say not," agreed the accused man. "You sorter dumfounded me wif yer charge, an'," his fingers falling to the wrist of the other arm, "my pulse is boundin' along like a yearlin' buck. I'm a dogmatic feline, but you scared me."

"I think Mr. Griffith will thank me for piloting him off the wrong track," added Ishmael, bowing pleasantly to the gentleman mentioned.

Steele had been biting his lip viciously, but he now rallied somewhat.

"Certainly I don't want to accuse an innocent man," he replied, "but if Kansas Kitten is not the guilty one, who is?"

His gaze wandered hesitatingly over the group of men.

"I don't claim much skill," easily continued the boy, "but I am sure we will all turn in and help find the real criminal. Mr. Brandreth, for one, don't want lawless acts committed in Black Rock Bend."

"Decidedly not," agreed the missionary.

At that moment the landlord, who was standing with his hands one on each side of the register, chanced to look down and see the name of the boy-witness boldly written on the page: "Ishmael Lee, Wildcat."

"He's misnamed," thought the honest man. "He may be from the town o' Wildcat, whar-ever that is, but he's as pleasant as a spring day."

There was but one thing for Brandreth, Griffith and their followers to do. Kansas Kitten had an alibi, and, after a few more words, they left the hotel. The identity of the man who had wounded Steele was more of a mystery than ever.

Ishmael soon went the same way, but he had not gone a hundred feet when Kansas Kitten appeared by his side.

"I'm very much obliged to you, lad," he said. "Considerin' that you an' me never set eyes on each other durin' last night, it was right friendly in yer ter give evidence in my favor."

"Don't mention it," replied the boy from Wildcat, quietly. "We'll let it rest for now, and I'll see you some other time."

And he walked rapidly away.

CHAPTER XVI.

ISHMAEL'S WARNING.

THE Mission school was out for the day and Mary Sherwin was at liberty. The afternoon was very pleasant, and its charms were more attractive than anything inside the Annex. She and Nell Stebbins were given to long walks about the town, where the woods and waters were unusually charming, but on this occasion Nell had gone to see Mrs. Griffith.

Mary determined to take her walk alone, and made her preparations by simply throwing on her wide-rimmed hat.

She determined to go toward the rock which had given the village its name—a favorite resort with her and Nell. Black Rock was far from being a gloomy place to the majority of people, though the timid did not fancy it at night.

In shape, the Rock was like a wedge. The east side was a gradual, easy ascent; the north was a ragged bluff, not easy to climb; the south was even more precipitous, with a narrow, beach-like belt of earth between it and the river; while the west presented a sheer cliff, dark-hued and destitute of even a shrub, which always stared the people of the town in the face. The top was wooded even to the brink of the cliff.

Mary reached the rock and, passing around the south side to the narrow belt before mentioned, sat down on a mossy rock beneath the branches of a small tree. She had brought a book, but, for a time, she did not open it. She sat gazing thoughtfully at the further bank of the river, with its unbroken line of trees.

She was not long left to her meditations, however. A footstep sounded on the pebbly shore, and Ishmael Lee came sauntering along. He did not appear to see Mary, and she had opportunity to observe him well.

He was fully settled at the Mission Annex, and she had naturally become somewhat acquainted with him. He had made a favorable impression among the Mission people. His quiet, melancholy air, and his worn face, had appealed to their sympathies, and as he had a way of making himself agreeable, all were favorably disposed.

Suddenly he looked up and saw Mary.

"You here?" he exclaimed with a smile.

"As you see," Mary answered.

"I fancied that this was a retired place—not that I was seeking retirement, but this is rather a somber resort."

"It pleases me."

"And so it does me. May I sit down?"

"Certainly."

The boy from Wildcat assumed a graceful position on the grass.

"I am falling in love with the Bend," he continued.

"That will please all loyal residents."

"It is so peaceful—so full of rest."

"Young men are not usually fond of rest."

"Not when they find pleasure otherwise; but when one has a hard life, and much experience with adversity, he feels older than he is, and rest is a blessed thing. But let us not speak of this. My mind is full of thoughts of Black Rock Bend. Do you like your life here?"

"Not particularly," Mary confessed.

"May I ask why you came?"

"I had to earn my living, and I chose the profession of a teacher. A chance was given me here, and I came. Besides—"

"Yes."

"I had other motives," finished the girl, evasively.

"I have heard a part of the story of the Buried Treasure, and know that at least one-half of it is yours by right. Was that another motive for your coming?"

"Yes and no. I don't expect ever to have a share of the Buried Treasure; I never did expect to; but it was somewhere up in these woods that my father lost his life. I am an orphan, and brother or sister I never had. During the last few years some influence has seemed to draw me to this wild region—I know not what influence—but my mind dwelt persistently on the subject until I yielded. I came, and here I am. Somewhere in yonder woods my father was murdered, I know not where."

Mary had said more than she intended. There were times when the fact of her lonely life settled heavily upon her, and then she was sad and dispirited. Conversation had called up all these feelings, and her voice trembled noticeably.

"And do you know who murdered him?"

Ishmael's voice sounded low and steady as he asked the question. He did not look at Mary, but off across the river. The half-lowered lids did not wholly conceal the eager expression in his eyes.

"I do not," Mary replied.

"Nor suspect?"

"No."

"Had your father no personal enemy?"

"I know of none."

Mary answered slowly, and then, after a thoughtful pause, as slowly added:

"Can it have been the work of a personal enemy?"

"Why not?"

"The idea has never occurred to me."

"Then why was the murder done? Not for the gold your father and Ralph Short carried, for it was not taken, even when there was a chance. It is evident that the murderers did not even know of the existence of this gold. Had they done so, do you suppose they would have let it slip?"

The force of the argument was not to be denied, and Mary did not answer at once. It was her turn to gaze at vacancy, while Ishmael watched every passing change of her expression with unswerving interest.

It would have surprised both of them had they known that other ears were drinking in their words, yet such was the fact. A few feet away, concealed by the shrubbery which bordered the foot of the cliff, a man lay upon the ground and watched and listened. He had reached the spot by worming along, snake-like, from the point of Black Rock, and the way in which he first appeared indicated that he had been acting the spy upon Ishmael.

However that may have been, he was now listening attentively.

This person was Kansas Kitten.

"Your words give rise to new ideas," finally responded Mary, turning to the boy from Wildcat, "but I cannot see any reason for believing them. Both of my parents died before I was old enough to remember them, but I have always been told that they were persons who made no enemies."

"The best of us are liable to have enemies."

"True."

"We don't have to go out of our way to make them. Often, the kindest, the best, the most Christian-like of men and women have enemies, for which fact they are no more responsible than is the dove for the swoop of the eagle which bears it away to its eyrie. But never mind this; I am not trying to form an opinion for you, for I am not properly situated. I am told that Yank Yellowbird will try to get the Buried Treasure for you."

"Such is the fact."

"Why is he interested?"

"Simply because he is a man of a thousand. His whole history, as it is told in the West, is that of a champion of the weak, needy and deserving. His own life is an aimless, wandering one. No tie of blood or business binds him anywhere. He goes and comes as free as the wind that blows. His foot presses the soil of the wilderness, the prairie and the mountain-top; and he looks only for quiet solitude, unless he sees a chance to right a wrong. Then he gives all his energy to it, and becomes a lion of war. Evil men hate him; deserving persons, men and women, bless his name. He is trying to find the Buried Treasure for me, and his whole record proves that he has only the most disinterested of motives. He does good, not for

the credit of it, but because it is the living impulse of his great heart!"

Mary spoke with enthusiasm, and her fair face flushed. Ishmael looked at her attentively.

"You speak strongly," he said.

"Am I more than just?"

"Honestly, I believe you are only just; I too have heard much of Yank Yellowbird, and I concur in what you have said. Now, one earnest word to you. You are aware, of course, that many other men are trying to find the treasure?"

"Yes."

"Possibly, some of them may be evil men."

"No doubt they are."

"Well, advice from such as you and I, to the veteran mountaineer, Nevermiss, may seem absurd, but I would urge you to speak strongly to him on one subject—bid him guard his life well while he searches for the gold. Every one knows that he has the best chance of all searchers to find the Treasure, and he will be the object of hatred of every evil person who tries to outwit him. Urge him and his companions to guard their lives well, for danger will menace them at every turn."

The boy from Wildcat spoke earnestly, and his voice had a solemn, warning inflection.

"I have thought of this," Mary returned, "and I will caution him; but it will be a cunning person who can outwit the mountaineer."

"Granted, but no one is bullet-proof. The passes, gulches and thickets may hide many an assassin, and a rifle will send death a long distance. Your helpers should use every precaution, and they should never be separated for a moment. Eternal vigilance, alone, is the price of safety while they are away."

Mary looked surprised and disturbed. Ishmael spoke so strongly that she was influenced with a dread new to her. Inquiring words trembled on her lips, but, after a moment, she remembered that Ishmael was only a boy.

Probably he was timid, and his fears exaggerated the danger of the expedition.

"I will give Yank due warning," she answered.

"Of course," pursued Ishmael, "it is nothing to me, but justice has its claims, and I should be sorry to see the Buried Treasure go to the wrong parties. And now I am going for a ramble in the woods. I'll see you, later, at the Mission. Good-by!"

The boy smiled lightly, waved his hand and walked away. He kept the open space until the eastern end of Black Rock was reached, and then entered the forest.

He did not go alone. No sooner had he begun his retreat than Kansas Kitten began to creep quickly along at the base of the rocks. The Kitten had listened with deep interest to all that had been said, and now evinced a strong desire to keep the boy from Wildcat in sight.

He succeeded in getting away unheard by Mary, and then he moved quickly after Ishmael. The latter seemed to have some more definite object in view than a "ramble" in the forest; he was moving in a direct line, and his steps were quick and long.

Kansas Kitten fell in behind him, and followed with the patience, if not the skill, of an Indian; and his efforts were by no means clumsy. He found Ishmael an interesting study. Ever since the boy came forward and, to prove an *alibi* for him, swore that he and the Kitten had been in the latter's room at the time Griffith was wounded, the Kitten had more than a passing motive for noticing his champion.

Wherever Ishmael had been, he had not been in his room that evening. Why, then, had the boy sworn as he did?

For a mile the pursuit lasted, and then Ishmael paused under a large, peculiar tree. Almost at once he was joined by a man, and the thick, yellowish beard which swept his breast left no room for doubt as to his identity.

It was Link Boxshot.

The Kitten had come to a halt, but the new turn of affairs raised his curiosity to a pitch higher than ever. Without the least hesitation he began to move forward again, intent upon overhearing what was said. He had noticed that the outlaw's manner was eager, and that of the boy calmly indifferent—plainly they were old acquaintances.

From that moment Ishmael stood branded, in the Kitten's mind, as Link Boxshot's spy.

The would-be listener worked his way forward as fast as he dared, but he was doomed to failure. The spot where the couple stood was extremely hard to reach, secretly, and just as he reached a favorable place some evil chance tempted them to walk slowly away. The spy had heard nothing worth bearing, but had made out that Boxshot had sought certain information of Ishmael, and that he had been disappointed. The outlaw did not try to conceal his anger.

Determined not to be beaten so easily, Kansas Kitten again followed.

CHAPTER XVII.

A STARTLING MEETING.

THE shades of night were falling when Kansas Kitten re-entered the village. He came back in a discontented frame of mind. He had reason

to believe that Ishmael had come in some time before him, but he did not know.

Kansas Kitten was disappointed and angry.

His attempt to discover the bond between the boy from Wildcat and Link Boxshot had been a failure. He had overheard a little; just enough to feel next to positive that Ishmael was at the Bend as Boxshot's agent; that they had met by appointment to allow the former to give the outlaw certain information; and that, from some reason, it had not been given.

Ignorance had been Ishmael's excuse.

Then they had separated, Boxshot going toward the heart of the forest, and the boy back toward the town. Kansas Kitten had tried to keep sight of him no longer. Instead, the Kitten took the most direct route home and did not deviate from it.

When he reached the hotel he had supper; then he retired to his room. A long period of meditation followed. He found Ishmael Leo the most interesting study of all the persons he had met at the Bend, and he intended to cultivate his acquaintance. As he was not a sentimental person, he would probably have taken prompt steps to inform Albert Brandreth that the boy was Link Boxshot's spy had it not been for one thing.

He owed Ishmael a debt of gratitude.

So he temporized, and retired for the night with the decision to delay action for awhile, keeping his attention upon Ishmael. He saw both possibilities and probabilities of no small moment in this acquaintance, and was ready to make the most of them.

When he went down-stairs in the morning he found two men in the main room busily discussing a certain point. That morning, he learned, Yank, Luke and Powderfoot had started out to find the Buried Treasure.

They had gone early—so early that no one claimed to have witnessed their departure—and the speakers did not know their destination, any further than that it was the mountains away to the north. In fact, it was the general opinion that an attempt to follow them would be useless; they would probably leave a "blind trail."

It was an event in the history of the Bend, for it was the most resolute effort yet made to find the buried gold, and the searchers were not men easily discouraged or beaten.

Having had his breakfast, Kansas Kitten walked over to the Mission to see Brandreth. He found a visitor already in the superintendent's office, and was not long in recognizing him.

It was the Indian, Red Knife, *alias* Adam, who had for a time acted as Boxshot's trailer in the woods, when the latter tried to capture the Kitten, Yank and Luke. But great was the change in the red-man! His fierce cruel expression was gone, and he looked as meek as any one could desire as he sat before Brandreth.

The latter's face was very grave as he talked.

"I am deeply disappointed in you, Adam," he was saying. "You were the first adult male of your people who professed to be influenced by my teachings when I came to the Bend. I did my duty by you; I taught you the way of true life and tried to lead you out of your darkened state; and all this was for your good—I gained nothing but the consolation of duty done. You professed to be influenced; you promised to abandon your old life and live as a Christian; and my heart was full of joy as I listened to your confession of faith. How all is changed now!"

"My father has listened to lies," muttered Adam, sullenly.

"I wish I could believe it."

"Lies—all lies!"

"Unfortunately, I have the word of men I cannot doubt that you were in the woods, aiding lawless white men to seek sacred human lives."

"Lies—all lies!" persisted the Indian, fiercely.

"I know no bad white men; I was not in the woods; my father has opened his ears to lies."

"Yank Yellowbird is one of my witnesses."

"Nevermiss is a liar!" Adam exclaimed, his eyes flashing with rage.

"Peace!" the superintendent sternly replied.

"I will no longer hear such talk. You only reiterate your statements, and in impenetrable language. Mr. Yellowbird is not a man to be doubted. As for you, Adam, I beseech you to repent. I will give you another chance, and I hope you will humble your wild spirit and see the error of your ways."

He arose as he spoke, and, understanding that the interview was over, Adam also rose. His evil face bore a hard, unpromising expression, but he said no more.

Drawing his blanket closer around his muscular figure he left the room, shot a suspicious, hostile glance at Kansas Kitten, and then stalked away toward the forest.

The Kitten entered the office.

"I see you've been reasonin' with the varmint," he said. "Thar ain't a shadder o' doubt that he was the reprobate we seen in the woods, tryin' ter foller our trail so Link Boxshot could butcher us."

"The man has grieved me more than I can

tell," sadly answered the missionary. "I had, I thought, good reason to believe that his wild nature had succumbed to the influence of light and truth, but you can see how sorely I was mistaken."

"It's bad fur you, I admit."

"I am not the only loser; the misguided man is neglecting the chance given him."

"True as Gospel, parson."

The door leading to the main room of the Mission suddenly opened, and Nell Stebbins appeared. She nodded to Kansas Kitten, and then addressed Mr. Brandreth.

"Has Adam been here?"

"Yes."

"What did he want?"

"Nothing. I saw him in the village; he would have avoided me; but I brought him here for a talk."

"Mr. Brandreth, I have grave fears as to that man," Nell earnestly added.

"Why so?"

"When father Powderfoot and his party went away, this morning, I watched them to the edge of the wood. When they disappeared, I saw something more—a single figure standing half-concealed by the bushes. It was Red Knife. Unless I am greatly mistaken, he was on the watch, and he saw them go as he wished. Now, bear in mind that he is on good terms with the forest outlaws—the men who hate honest Yank bitterly, and who wish to kidnap father Powderfoot—and see what inference is to be drawn."

Nell spoke rapidly, feverishly, and a deep shadow of doubt and fear was on her usually bright face.

"I hope there is no bad inference," Brandreth answered.

"Do you think there is not?"

"Let us bear in mind the character of Adam. He is, figuratively speaking, a night-hawk. He is out at all hours. I don't think that it proves anything that he was astir so early."

"Nor that he watched them go away?"

"Are you sure he did?"

"I believe he did."

"Even if it is so, what does it signify?"

"That Red Knife was the outlaws' spy, and that he will carry word to them that father Powderfoot and the rest are gone, and the whole gang will soon be after them!"

Deep trouble was perceptible in Nell's every word and look.

"Not so bad as that, my dear; and, even if it is so, the outlaws would know it anyway, soon. Again, I know of no men better able to care for themselves than the three bold souls who have gone to the hills."

"Father Powderfoot is an old man, sir."

"But brave and strong."

Nell's eyes sparkled.

"I wish I had known him in his younger days. He must have been a wonder then! Yank Yellowbird would have to look to his honors if father Powderfoot was thirty years younger. Well, well, I don't suppose I can help matters by worrying about Red Knife. I'll return to my pupils."

"Have the two new Indian children come?"

"Yes, sir."

"I'll go in and see them a moment. Mr.—a—Kansas Kitten, will you excuse me and await my return?"

"Delighted, I'm sure," answered the Kitten, with an awkward bow.

Nell and Brandreth went into the next room, while the Kitten, left alone, first meditated and then shook his head gravely. He placed reliance in Nell's suspicion, if the missionary did not. To him it looked like the most probable of things that Red Knife was acting as a spy for Boxshot, and that the whole gang would soon be at the heels of the devoted trio of gold-seekers.

"I hope," muttered the Kitten, "that Harry Sherwin warned Yank as earnestly as Ishmael bade her do. Ishmael! He is a mystery to me. He seems to be Boxshot's ally, and was clearly knowin' ter an intention ter go fur the gold-hunters; but he voiced as plain a warnin' as I ever heerd. An' he did me a good turn. Why? That's what I'm goin' ter larn."

The rustle of a woman's dress interrupted his musings, and he looked up quickly. A well-dressed lady had entered the office. It was Mrs. Steele Griffith. She bowed and smiled pleasantly.

"Excuse me, sir," she said, "but I thought Mr. Brandreth was here."

Kansas Kitten had risen. His gaze was fixed full upon her face, as with a species of fascination, and the color had swept in a flood to his cheeks as though he were a diffident school-boy. Agitation, plain yet incomprehensible, marked his manner in every way.

"Yes; he isn't in the next room," he answered, with an effort, and his confusion of words was not greater than the stammering of his tongue.

Marion looked at him in some surprise.

"Do you know—"

She began the sentence quietly, but it was never finished. Her voice died away; doubt, surprise and uncertainty swept over her face; and then her own face flushed.

"Can it be—"

Thus far she spoke, and then paused.

"What?" asked Kansas Kitten, in a whisper.

"That you are Warren Locke?" was the agitated question.

Kansas Kitten drew a deep, long breath. Then he folded his arms, the rude dialect vanished from his speech; and he replied almost calmly:

"Yes; I am he!"

"Warren Locke, here!" she exclaimed, still surprised.

"Even so."

"I did not think to see you."

The man shut his teeth tightly and tried to be fully calm, but his heart was beating with almost startling force.

"I hope you are not sorry to see me," he added.

Mrs. Griffith made a perceptible effort to recover her own self-possession.

"I certainly am not sorry to see an old-time friend."

She made the avowal, but it was noticeable that neither offered to clasp hands. It was a peculiar meeting, but there was good reason for their course. Old memories were revived, and, now that the first shock was past, each face grew paler than usual.

Marion abruptly turned and sunk into a chair.

"I am not well," she said, explanatorily.

"So I have heard."

"I have not walked as far as this in a week before; I only came to-day out of desperation. I was feeling particularly bad, and I roused my energies and came here to see Miss Stebbins, hoping it would do me good."

Kansas Kitten looked down at her pale face with an expression which did not belie the words which followed:

"I am very sorry," he said, simply.

"I suppose it is fate."

"Fate is sometimes cruel."

Marion flashed him a quick, questioning glance.

"Probably we all get our deserts."

"We do not," he vehemently answered. "You never have. If you had the lot you deserve, you would be well and—happy."

"Pardon me, we will not speak of that."

There was a shadow—almost an expression of misery—on each face, and though her voice expressed no severity, her companion did not answer.

"I did not expect to see you here," she added, presently.

"No," he mechanically agreed.

"May I ask why you came?"

Kansas Kitten passed his hand quickly, nervously across his face. He seemed wholly changed. The careless, cool, ignorant vagabond was transformed into a gentleman, but not a happy one, if signs were to be believed.

"Many places see me, of late," he replied. "I hardly know one day where I shall be the next."

He had evaded the point, and a brief silence followed. He was devouring her with eager glances, metaphysically speaking, and there was one point on which he wanted information. He sought it with a lack of *finesse* born of the troubled state of his mind.

"Is—Griffith doing well now?" he bluntly asked.

Another shadow swept over her face.

"In business? Yes, he is doing quite—"

"No, no!" he sharply interrupted; "I do not mean that. Is he using you as an honorable man should act toward a good, true wife?"

The question burst vehemently from his lips, and a startled light appeared in Marion's eyes. She looked around with a frightened expression.

"Forbear, Warren Locke, forbear!" she answered, huskily. "I have confidence enough in you to say that he is now very kind, but let us speak of it no more. Let the past be dead. While we are together bear with me. Let us talk of our village; this little town hewn out of the heart of the wilderness—"

She paused. A footstep sounded at the door; both glanced that way; and then, most ominous interruption, Steele Griffith entered the room.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE TREASURE-SEEKERS.

THE last rays of the setting sun were resting upon the tops of the hills, and in the valleys dark shadows were stealing along as the vanguard of night.

Down in a ravine three men were laboring with pick and spade. It was not hard to surmise their object, yet no veteran prospector would have located there. It was a spot which held out no promise of "pay-dirt," and the workers knew it. They were not looking for ore upon which the eyes of man had never rested, but for treasure dug years before.

Yank, Powderfoot and Luke had reached the hills after a long, slow journey through the forest. Locating in a place to suit their fancy, they had erected a hut of the plainest description and gone to work. They had four horses, digging materials, a little food and some other necessities, and that was all.

First of all, they turned their attention to a

gully which, they thought, bore a trifling resemblance to Dark Ravine, and the work with pick and spade had gone on bravely; but the conviction was fast settling upon each that another, false start had been made.

The bed of the ravine had been well turned over, and nothing had been found to indicate that it was the place where Ralph Short had buried the lost gold a score of years before. The spades were going slowly, now, as though each was getting discouraged, and Moses, usually on the alert for excitement, was dozing on the ground at one side.

Yank Yellowbird thrust his spade deep into the soil and, leaving it there, drew his tall form erect.

"I consait I've got enough!" he exclaimed.

"Do you mean that you are in favor o' quit-ting fur ter-night?" asked Powderfoot.

"I do, Pathfinder; I do, by hurley! an' not only fur ter-night, but, as fur as this egregious ravine is consarned, fur good an' all. I sorter enjoy the work, fur the Yellowbirds take nat'rally ter gardenin'—my venerable ancestor, Adam, had a garden at Eden that was a caution ter all intringers on his patent—but I consait this diggin' whar thar ain't a ghost o' a show fur cabbages, squashes, turnips or red-lashes, ain't ter my taste. Not much, it ain't!"

"Nevermiss, do you think the gold is in this hyar ravine?"

"Not a bit on't."

"My idee, exactly. We've dug it pretty well up, an' I'm satisfied we've struck another barren place."

"Our young frien' ain't voted," Yank observed.

"My opinion is not the ruling one," Luke answered, smiling, "but since you two have spoken, I will say that I am fully in accord with your views."

"Expressed like a book!" said Yank, with a nod. "I can't reel off language like that, though afore I had the newrolgy so bad I's powerful good on obtuse words. It all come o' my s'perior eddication. My parients didn't spare no expense, an' I was sent ter a fash'nable school at an early age. The difference atween metaphors, familiars, alligators, fables, apologies, collusions, slopes, catasneezesis, and other figgers o' speech was duly presented ter me with a bird's-eye maple ruler an' artom over three foot long. I not uncommonly l'arned so much in a sartain day that, by mornin', thar would be blisters on me as big as a pancake, an' all due ter the voylence o' my eddication—an' the ruler."

The mountaineer paused, shook his fore-finger at Luke, and gravely added:

"'Twas 'stonishin', lad, ter see how fast I l'arned arter the master raised a blister. You see, the skin bein' tender, the eddication could git inter me a heap easier."

"No doubt."

"Shall we take the tools ter the hut?" asked the Pathfinder.

"I should say so. We don't want no more o' this atrocious ravine, an' they'll be safer close ter hand. Don't load yerself down, Powderfoot; Luke an' I are mere boys. When I've swung that egregious pick ten hours a day, I feel jest like caperin' like a colt. I would, too, ef 'twan't fur the consarned newrolgy. Come on, Moses, an' sorter trot on ahead. Thar may be hostile insex ahead, an' I consait your nose kin smell 'em out."

"Have you seen suspicious signs, mountaineer?"

"Not one."

"Yet you are not a man to be lulled into a false security."

"Land o' Goshen! no—I ain't b'en lulled fur nigh onter fifty year now, an' the shingle that did it is long sense dust an' ashes, probly. As fur possible intringers on our right, I expect 'em, same's we must expect fevers, toothache an' corns, an' I consait we know how ter deal wi' 'em. Hyar's the hut, an' thar's the hosses over yon. So fur we are all tergether."

The treasure-hunters had built their humble abode with an eye to possible trouble. It was where a large wood came down with a level surface to the hills. Beyond, all was rough and broken. The hut was almost concealed by its natural surroundings, and retreat in any direction was easy, with a choice between forest and mountain. All this had been carefully considered before they located. There was not one of them who had not often risked his life in scenes of danger, but there was more than personal safety to be considered now.

They believed that Link Boxshot and his men would sooner or later appear, despite the fact that they had left a blind trail behind them, and this was not to their liking; they wanted a chance to search for the Buried Treasure in peace.

The hut proved to be as they had left it. Moses, who seemed to have imbibed the general distrust, ran about with his nose close to the ground, and then certified that all was well by wagging his tail briskly.

Moses was developing into quite a different dog. He would never be less than homely and ungainly, but his former extreme lankness was in a measure disappearing, and he was casting

off the dispirited, timid air he had once allowed to rule him as a result of persistent abuse.

The fire was renewed; supper was cooked and eaten; the horses were brought in and picketed near the hut; and then the treasure-hunters sat down to smoke and talk.

"One more onavailin' effort," said Powderfoot.

"An' one more step nigher success," added Yank.

"I hope so."

"I ain't an artom o' doubt on't."

"Are you fully resolved to abandon our present field of operations?" Luke asked.

"I consait so."

"Where do we dig next?"

"What d'ye say, Pathfinder? Thar is the gulch over east o' hyar, though I can't see as it looks an artom like Dark Ravine. Shall we take it, or move on north?"

"I say look the gulch over a bit ter-morrer, an' then move on. I ain't much hope o' the gulch."

"Nor me."

Yank stroked his beard and, looking quizzically at Luke, gravely added:

"I may be finikel, but I ain't no great desirer ter dig up all the Western kentry. Seems that a spade an' I ain't congenial spirits, fur the work gives me a voylent crick in the back. I consait ef I'd took nat'ral ter hard labor, I'd b'en a farmer, fur I got a good start on't. My folks 'prenticed me ter an agricult'rist—at least, he said he'd take me on suspicion. He did, too, an' the fu'st thing he did was ter trot me out in the barn-yard, whar he had sev'ral likely cows."

"Ever do any milkin'?" sez he.

"Not any," sez I.

"You'll soon l'arn," sez he, smilin' at me benignant over his specks. "You take the brindled one; she's as gentle as a lamb," sez he; an' then he armed me with a three-legged stool an' a tin-pail o' ancient date."

"Wal, I consait I wa'n't goin' ter git left very bad that time, an' I went at it courageous. Fu'st off the milk didn't flow ter any great extent, but I sorter ketched on, an' all was goin' lovely when the brindled cow's tail come around an' give me an egregious wipe right in the eyes. It drew tears in spite o' my nat'ral hardihood o' karakter, an' I axed the farmer ef he couldn't hire another boy ter hold the cow's tail, so I wouldn't git another swipe; but he said 'twas part o' the trade, an' I'd soon git used ter it. I wiped away the water from my eyes an' went at it ag'in, but 'twan't the natur' o' the Yellowbirds ter be trod down an' oppressed; an' I sorter consaited thar'd be trouble ef the cow did it ag'in. I kep' my eye on her tail, but, land o' Goshen! lightnin' ain't no sarcunstance ter the way a cow kin whisk her caudal appendix when she sots out ter do it. Bime-hy, slap! an' I got another lick in the eyes."

"Now, I ain't quarrelsome, but I've got enough respecck fur the Yellowbird pedigree not ter stan' too much; besides, I was tremenjous r'iled, an' I jest give that cow a poke in the ribs ter let her know I's around an' present. Pathfinder, I's al'ays wished I hadn't done it—I have, by hurley!—for, afore you could wink, up comes her foot, an' me, an' the stool, an' the pail was landed ten foot away, an' all o' six quarts o' milk was doused onter my raiment."

"I scrambled ter my feet, drippin' with milk an' mud, an' up come the farmer, laughin' like hurley."

"You slipped off the stool, didn't ye?" sez he.

"That condemned cow kicked me off," sez I, nigh about ready ter cry, I's so mad.

"Why didn't ye ketch her foot?" sez he.

"I did ketch the atrocious thing, right in my weskit," sez I.

"She'll know ye nex' time, an' be gentle," sez he.

"No, she won't," sez I, "fur these hyar scenes will know me no more. I've had all I want o' cows gentle as lambs," sez I, slingin' a rock at the cause o' my disaster, an' I'm goin' ter gradooate. I consait my complexion don't match brindled cows, an' I won't let no cow stick her foot inter my weskit-pocket when I ain't lookin'!"

"With that I kicked the milk pail inter the waterin'-trough an' lit out, an' I hain't never b'en back. Since then I never go nigh a brindled cow 'thout I keep my hand over my weskit-pocket."

Abruptly enough, Yank followed the last words with a terse direction.

"Notice the dog."

Moses had erected his ears, his eyes bright and inquiring. He now arose partially. Yank lifted his rifle.

"Footsteps!" he said; "I hear 'em plain. Set still. They ain't secret, but reg'lar an' heavy. Either the walker don't know we're hyar, or—"

He tapped the barrel of his long rifle suggestively. The appearance of the dog now became more threatening. He glared at the deer, showed his teeth, and seemed ready to precipitate himself on whoever appeared. Luke placed his arm around the animal's neck, and all waited with interest. Plainer grew the steps, and then a man appeared in the doorway. He paused and looked at them curiously.

He was a man of middle age, with coarse, well-worn garments, long, shaggy hair and beard; and no visible weapon except the rifle he carried across his left shoulder. He met the suspicious, none-too-friendly gaze of three pair of human eyes, not to mention the dog's, but his own air was quiet and easy.

"Hullo, gents," he finally said.

"Hullo, yourself!" responded Yank, somewhat curtly.

"I reckon I'm among civilized critters," pursued the stranger.

"Hope 'tain't a novelty to be."

"Eh?"

"I made a gin'ral remark."

The stranger removed his hat and stirred up his tangled hair with four dirty fingers.

"I don't understand at all, but I reckon it's all right," he agreed. "D'ye keep open house?"

"We do at present, fur the carpenter ain't brought no door ter close it up. Lumber comes high, owin' ter a scarcity o' saw-mills an' the like. Come in, stranger, an' set down. Don't go on the side nex' the dog, fur he's got an egregious bankerin' fur meat. Hev ter pry it out o' his teeth three times a day with a crowbar."

"Thank ye hearty; I'll come in."

The stranger suited the action to the word. He was cheerful, which seemed to show that he was not fastidious as to the welcome he received. Moses menaced him with exposed teeth, Powderfoot and Luke looked stern and suspicious; while Yank's opening curtness had been succeeded by an ungracious invitation to the hut which would not have encouraged the average man.

Not so the night-visitor. He came in promptly, and sat down on a fire-log to which Nevermiss pointed. Then followed a brief silence. The stranger was the focus of all glances but his own, while on his own part he took in everything in the hut which was to be seen, with a slow, investigating gaze.

Without a word to that effect, each of the occupants of the hut had decided that this visit was the forerunner of trouble.

CHAPTER XIX.

A SUSPICIOUS VISITOR.

YANK YELLOWBIRD stroked his sparse beard in a steady, deliberate way.

"How've ye b'en o' late, stranger?" he asked.

"Eh?" questioned the unwelcome visitor.

"How's yer wife an' children?"

"Can't say. Ain't got no sech article."

"Land o' Goshen! that a fact? I ree'ly wouldn't 'a' b'lieved it. Now ter look at ye I'd sartainly take ye fur a married man; wouldn't you, Luke?"

The young man briefly answered in the affirmative, scarcely knowing what statement he was corroborating.

"I'm a bachelor," the stranger explained.

"I didn't quite ketch yer name."

"It's Sime Lawson. I come o' the Lawsons of the Osage Mountains."

"To be sure. Long walk, you've had; must 'a' started afore dinner. I consait you feel the newrolgy in yer knees."

"I don't clearly understand; you don't seem ter talk ter the pint. I like a man that talks ter the pint. I'm a plain man, myself. I don't claim no book-larnin', nor wear no jewels; nor set up fer a cheeribim. I'm jest plain Sime Lawson, scout, hunter, guide and trapper. I'm some on the shoot but as mild dispositioned as a rabbit. I's on my way south, but I seen yer fire an' dropped in. I like company."

"Jes' so—jes' so. We've got the main facks o' yer hist'ry now, an' you hev a talent fur spinnin' it off, I'll admit. Haven't got a fam'ly pedigree made out, an' sartified to by a legal town-clerk, hev ye?"

"I'm down, ag'in," acknowledged Lawson.

"I swear I can't understand half ye say. I'm a plain man, an' when I meet a college feller I can't ketch the drift o' half his remarks. Ef you'll talk English, I'll thank ye, captain."

"You needn't call me by no military title," Yank retorted, curtly. "I ain't that kind o' a man, though we did have one soldier in the Yellowbird fam'ly, some year ago. His name was David, an' they do say he was a right likely-lookin' lad when he got fixed up in his blue clo's, with brass buttons an' a clean collar. 'Twas the fashion ter fight with slings in them days, an' my Uncle David won some renown by heavin' a rock at a big chap named Goliath, which smote the man hip an' thigh, an' in other ways, grievously."

"You come o' a remarkable fam'ly," pardner."

"Ter be sure. How about yourn, mister?"

"I reckon we're the best. Down in the Osage region the Lawsons rank high."

"Should thought you'd stayed thar."

"I'm a rollin'-stone."

"Should like ter see ye roll."

"This talk is vain," declared Mr. Lawson, showing some ill-feeling. "Now, I'm a pilgrim an' a stranger, an' I'm a-hungry an' thirsty. The question is, must I move on, or will you show more hospitality, an' give me a chance ter flop down hyar?"

He thrust out his rifle, as though to indicate the precise spot where he wished to lie, whereupon Moses showed his teeth again and growled

savagely. In fact, Moses had not abated his suspicious a particle; and only for Laramie Luke's restraining hand, he might long before have launched himself upon the visitor. Each of the treasure-seekers had noticed the dog's peculiar manner and wondered at it. Since Yank took charge of him, Moses had never wavered in his earnest fidelity, and Yank's friends were his, too, but the animal had developed a belligerent side of his character which made him opposed to outsiders.

Never before, however, had he shown actual hostility to any one, and when he crouched by Luke, continually keeping his gaze on Lawson, and exhibiting a persistent desire to attack the man, his friends could not help wondering as to the cause of it.

The same suspicion was in the mind of each. Had Moses recognized in Lawson one of his former persecutors of the days when he followed the fortunes of Boxshot's band?

Lawson had several times glanced at the dog, and the final growl caught his attention and held it.

"You've got a vicious brute thar," he observed.

"Land o' Goshen, yes!" the mountaineer agreed. "He is an egregious fighter, is Moses. He's half-painter, anyhow, an' was raised as an experient. I hev ter keep him in the woods, fur the last time we took him ter the settlements he chewed five children all ter pieces. Even up hyar he manages ter satisfy his cravin' fur gore, an' he kills a wand'rin' trapper or hunter 'most ev'ry day."

Yank libeled his faithful follower with grim humor, but Lawson saw no joke. He looked dubiously at the dog, shook his head, and then turned again to Nevermiss.

"The question is," he resumed, "kin I stay hyar over night with ye?"

"You're as welcome as corn-dodgers fur breakfast. Our mansion ain't big, but I consait we kin all sleep hyar ef we let our feet hang out o' the winder. Make yerself at home. Take a rockin'-cheer, an' put on an extra pair o' slippers, ef ye can find 'em. You're perfectly safe ef you keep away from the dog, an' don't git nigh the muzzles o' our guns."

It was not a warm welcome, and Yank's manner was curt and ungracious. He was convinced that this man was among them as a spy and an enemy, but, now that he was there, it was not to their interests to let him go away and tell his story to any one.

Already the mountaineer had decided that the morning sun must shine upon them miles away from their present habitation. That Boxshot and his men were near he was convinced, and steps must be taken to avoid them.

Their own purpose was not clear. They might make a murderous attack at once, or they might hover around until the Buried Treasure had been unearthed, and then pounce upon the trio. Doubtless they had thought that their spy could make what seemed only a chance visit, and arouse no suspicion.

Lawson made a show of accepting the invitation genially. He laid aside his hat, set his rifle up behind him, and talked volubly. He took no liberties about the hut, however, and kept well away from Moses.

Yank, Powderfoot and Luke exchanged comprehensive glances, but the last two said little. The office of entertainer was by unspoken consent given to Yank, and he was not found wanting. Conversation never flagged, and the mountaineer did his part, but it was not in his usual genial way. Much that he said was curt and discourteous and his companions knew that he held opinions of Lawson in keeping with their own.

Considerable time had elapsed when Yank quietly rose.

"I'm goin' out ter look at the weather," he said.

Several pairs of questioning eyes were turned upon him. Lawson was about to speak when the mountaineer added:

"Of course I'll find ye all hyar when I come back."

He glanced meaningly at Luke and the Pathfinder as he spoke, and they had their cue; they were to keep the unwelcome visitor with them. Yank took his rifle, while Moses moved to his side.

"Come, dog!" he continued, and then the pair passed from the hut.

The mountaineer moved a little away from the hut and then paused. He could see the horses standing quietly where they had been left. They were evidently resting easily. All was silent about the vicinity. It was not a favorite resort of any kind of animal, and suspicious sounds there would mean something. There were none now. At that moment he could see nothing to indicate that any foe was within many miles of them.

He was not to be put off his guard. The security might be real or deceptive, and he preferred to consider it the latter and use care. The nearest thicket might hide an outlaw who was seeking his life. Moses elevated his nose, analyzed the air dog-fashion, and then settled down contentedly. Yank nodded quietly.

"Think it's all right, do ye? Wal, it may be,

right around hyar, but the best on us is liable ter be egregiously took in at times. I hev b'en afore now, an' you ain't roamed the woods as long as I have, though I admit that you hev a sharper smell. Come on, an' we'll see ef any atrocious insex are in the neighborhood."

Holding his rifle ready for use, he walked on at an easy pace. A casual observer would have said that he was only sauntering about without an object, but his footsteps were almost noiseless, and his keen eyes and ears ever on the alert.

Trifling, indeed, must be the circumstance that could escape his notice.

The quiet aspect of affairs continued, however, and he made a complete circuit of the hut without seeing anything suspicious. He did not pause then, though. The ill-looking visitor had come from the west, and toward the west Yank now bent his steps. Ravines and ridges lay in his course; the rough region which was the beginning of the hills.

He went directly to one of the highest of these ridges, and, gaining an elevated point, proceeded to survey the whole surrounding scene with care which was most painstaking. Had he been Link Boxshot he would have left no tell-tale sign, but experience had taught him that many men trust a good deal to luck.

He hoped it would now prove so with the outlaws, if they were near.

Several minutes passed in inactivity; then the veteran suddenly threw his rifle across his shoulder.

"Come, Moses!" he directed, briefly.

The dog wagged his tail understandingly and followed. Straight down the side of the ridge went the mountaineer; then on beyond; never deviating unnecessarily from a direct course. In this way one-quarter of a mile was soon traversed. Then they reached the top of a ridge and Yank's caution increased. With great care and deliberation he marked a certain place and proceeded to reach it; he accomplished his object, and an interesting view was vouchsafed him.

Beyond and below him was a valley, and on its bottom burned a camp-fire. It was that of no insignificant party. Some of them were so retired that he could but dimly see them, but nine men were plainly visible.

How many more were in the background he did not know; but he was not at a loss to understand the meaning of the camp.

All his suspicions were being verified.

The rattling of a stone turned his attention in another direction, and he saw two men advancing directly toward the thicket which concealed him. He laid a restraining hand upon Moses, and waited quietly. With grim satisfaction he soon discovered that one of the pair was Link Boxshot, and then he watched with unceasing attention.

Whatever might be the end of the rivalry, he was equaling the forest bravo at every point thus far, and his confidence had never been greater than at that moment.

CHAPTER XX.

TROUBLE ON THE TRAIL.

LINK BOXSHOT paused within ten feet of Yank's covert.

"We may as wal go ter camp," he said. "I'm gettin' some weary in the legs, an' thar ain't no good in runnin' them off."

"Not at all," replied his companion, who proved to be Pride Oliver, the outlaw lieutenant.

"We'll take it easy until Sime gits back. I reckon he'll find chance ter give them chaps the slip by midnight, an' then we'll hear his report. Ef it's favor'ble, thar will be work ter do afore mornin'."

"I don't want to be persistent, captain, but you know my views. I say, let the other crowd alone until they have found the gold, and then pounce upon them, and take it away."

"I know, I know; an' your scheme would be all right with common men; but when we deal with Yank Yellowbird, it's another matter. That feller has the cunnin' of the Old Nick. Look at the way he blinded their trail from the Bend! Ef we had depended on findin' it, we'd never havedone so; an' that was why I made a gin'ral s'arch of the hills for them. We're buckin' ag'in' a bad man in Yellowbird. Others hev tried it afore us, an' how did they come out? They got almighty left!"

"All this is true," Oliver admitted.

"Wal, the only hope we hev fur the Buried Treasure is ter kill the tall mountain-man, off-hand."

"But Powderfoot and the young fellow may abandon the search," urged the lieutenant.

"They won't; I ain't a bit afeard of it."

"Well, you are master."

"I reckon I'm able ter handle the case, too. I ain't a child, ef I do say it, Pride Oliver. I wish I had Yellowbird here at this minute!"

The outlaw held out his huge hand proudly. The mountaineer smiled grimly patted his rifle as though it were a living thing, and waited patiently.

"Others have tried it, captain," answered Oliver.

"They wa'n't me."

"True."
"What I undertake ter do, I do," boastingly declared the captain, "an' I've made up my mind ter kill that Yank."

There was a brief silence, and then Boxshot added:

"Ter-night sees the work done. Sime ought ter be back by midnight, an' when we've heard his report we'll fall onter them, ef the report is anyways favorable. Mind, only Yank is ter be laid out. The others must go free, so they can dig the Buried Treasure fur us. They ain't got Yellowbird's diabolical cunnin', an' we kin rob them of it, easy."

"Just as you say, captain."

"We'll go down now. Throw out a few sentinels, as I told ye afore, an' we'll have some fun ter-night."

The big leader turned and went down the slope, followed by Oliver. Again Yank smiled grimly. The tributes to his prowess and cunning were forgotten for the time, but there was a good deal of amusement to be extracted from the unbounded reliance Boxshot placed in his plans. He had arranged his line of conduct, and decided just how he would permanently dispose of Yank, and though he admitted the latter's skill, he expected the victim to fall obediently into the trap.

"I reel'ly can't return the compliments he give me," muttered the mountaineer, "fur I must say Mr. Boxshot is a stupid owl. Ef he'd b'en wal stocked with common sense he'd never sent his man Simon ter our camp—not much, he wouldn't. Come, Moses, we'll go!"

The dog readily obeyed. He had manifested great uneasiness while the outlaws were near, as well as hostility, and only Yank's quieting touch had prevented an outbreak. As it was, Moses had conducted himself well under trying circumstances; he had restrained himself when near his old persecutors and enemies.

"I'm proud on ye!" quoth the mountaineer, looking at him in a friendly manner. "I took ye in as a run-down vagrant, but you're showin' qualities encouragin' ter behold. I consait you'll keep the Yellowbird pedigree up ter its high standard."

The return to the hut was soon made, and Yank found the situation as he left it. Laramie Luke was thoughtfully smoking, while Powderfoot and Lawson talked in a desultory way.

Every gaze was turned upon the new-comer, but he seemed unconscious of them all.

"I consait thar ain't no danger o' rain," he mildly observed, as he set his rifle against the wall.

"Was thar no clouds?" Powderfoot asked, significantly.

"A few on the howrizon, but not enough fur rain. It takes a cloud o' some size ter make a shower, an' a few midgets are encouragin'. One o' my ancestors had charge o' the weather-bureau, an' the rest o' the furnitoor, when Herod was King o' France, an' he handed down ter posterity the most vallerable charts, tables, monograms an' dissections on the subjeck ever c'lected by one man. He got sech control o' the weather that he run it about as he see fit—he did, by hurley!"

Three men were watching Yank narrowly, and there was suspicion in Lawson's gaze, but the mountaineer rambled on in a way wholly unconcerned.

As he finished speaking he picked up his blanket and proceeded to spread it in the corner near Lawson. His manner had never been more quiet and bland, and he made a few good-humored remarks to their guest which swept away a good deal of the latter's suspicion.

He forgot that his rifle was near Yank, but the latter did not. Lawson looked a little troubled as he saw it in the veteran's hands. It had been picked up as it rested against the wall.

"Quite a toy," Yank resumed. "Loaded stranger?"

"Sartain."

"A rifle is an innercent-lookin' thing ter them that don't understand them, I consait; an' it don't seem possible that they hev so much mischief in 'em. Now, ef I's ter p'int this at your head—"

He suited the action to the word, greatly to Lawson's disturbance.

"Hol' on, pardner; hol' on!" he exclaimed.

"To be sure; I've got it, an' I'll hold on. Mister, this gun is confiscated, an' you're our pris'ner!"

Yank's manner changed with startling abruptness. One moment he was outwardly careless and indifferent as man could be; the next, his voice grew quick and stern, and his eyes bore flashingly upon Lawson. The latter turned pale and tried to start up, but Nevermiss thrust the rifle a little further forward.

"Down, you varmint, down!" he exclaimed.

"Wh-wh-what does this mean?" stammered Lawson.

"It means business, the wu'st way. Set you still, mister, an' don't ye raise yer voice above a mellow tone. Ef you do, I'll yank the trigger, by hurley! You're a pris'ner. Pathfinder, take them cords over yonder an' tie him up!"

"Gentlemen, I protest—"

Lawson began quaveringly, but he was cut short.

"Your protest is tabled. Don't you be afeerd. We ain't o' the kind that do butcherin', but tie you up we will, sure's fate. Put on the strings, Powderfoot!"

It was a bitter experience for Lawson, but he had no choice. The rifle bore ominously upon him, and Laramie Luke and Moses had taken a menacing stand—the outlaw uttered a sound, half-groan and half-imprecation, and sulkily submitted.

Not until he was firmly bound did he recover his presence of mind; then he spoke out quite glibly.

"I'd like ter know the meanin' o' this outrage!" he declared, with a proper show of indignation.

"It must puzzle you egregariously," dryly responded the mountaineer, "but I ain't got time ter explain. All you hev ter do is ter lay still, an' I hope you'll do it wal. Ef you don't, you may git inter trouble, fur I don't admire ye much. I was born with antipathies, an' they will stick to me."

The speaker then took Luke and the Pathfinder aside and addressed a few words to them in a low voice.

General activity succeeded this consultation, and then preparations were quickly made for vacating the hut. There was little to do; not a superfluous article had been brought along on the trip; and "packing" was a trouble to be dispensed with. When all was done Lawson was bound to a timber of the hut and gagged. Naturally, he again protested, but no notice was taken of his words.

The gag soon stopped them.

Then the little party left the place. The spades and picks, which had been arranged so as to prevent any betraying noise, were strapped upon the extra horse, and the retreat was begun. Their course was toward the northeast, but it was only a blind, as they intended to break their trail at a proper time, and then push away toward the west.

Not yet did Yank mount. His horse had been given in charge of Powderfoot, while Luke led the extra animal; and Yank went on well in advance. Certain words dropped by Boxshot and Oliver led him to believe that outlaws were posted here and there, and it was a matter of importance to guard against them.

With due precautions the journey was begun. The night was a fine one, and just light enough to make secrecy easy. There was no moon, and a slight haze hung over the sky. Thus they were enabled to choose a favorable route, and, at the same time, guard against being seen.

Yank held his rifle in an easy position and walked away as quietly as though no danger was to be apprehended, but his attentive gray eyes were never at rest. They flashed investigating glances here, there and almost everywhere; and one place after another was seen, scrutinized and proved harmless. A hundred rods beyond the camp, however, was one point which he had mentioned to the Pathfinder, and both had given the opinion that it was deserving of extra notice. It was there that, in their opinion, a guard would be most likely to be found.

When they neared it the mountaineer called for a halt and went forward accompanied only by Moses. One moment Yank's tall figure was to be seen; then it disappeared in the bushes as silently as though it had melted into the air.

Laramie Luke kept his place, but turned his gaze upon Powderfoot. The septuagenarian sat as though carved of marble. Long years of adventure had made such experience second nature, and he trusted fully in Nevermiss.

"Shall I ever," wondered Luke, "become the equal of these men? I have had what seems long practice on the frontier, but I am a novice here. It is a wonder that they do not think me a callow stripling—and, perhaps, they do."

He turned his head with a trifle of annoyance.

The leaves of the bushes at his right rustled slightly. Was it the wind? Or the passage of some insignificant wild creature? He bent his gaze sharply on the suspicious quarter; thus might the leaves have rustled were some human being cautiously and slowly passing through the underbrush. He glanced at Powderfoot. The old man no longer seemed like a statue; he was looking in the same direction, and he made a quiet gesture.

"Look to it!" he said, in a scarcely audible voice.

Luke slid from his horse, left his rifle and, knife in hand, glided toward the moving object. He felt that his reputation was at stake, and never before had he tried harder to make his movements successful and silent. At first there seemed to be an impassable barrier of bushes, but further survey revealed a tunnel like passage next to the ground and about breast high.

He bent and entered.

Pausing occasionally, he went on with all-absorbing caution, and one fact soon became clear; he and the other moving object were advancing directly toward each other. A meeting seemed unavoidable.

Luke grasped his knife closer and went on grimly. Not under any consideration would he have retreated when the Pathfinder's eyes were upon him, but the outlook was not pleasant.

Was the unknown creature a man, or was it a wild animal in encounter with which he would have no chance for victory, or even life?

He crouched down, awaiting the unknown.

Then nearer came the soft, stealthy advance, and in the darkness of the thicket a still darker object loomed up not over three feet away.

CHAPTER XXI.

LARAMIE LUKE'S SURPRISE.

ONE question was settled as soon as Luke gained a good view of the moving object. It was a man. The outlines of his figure were distinctly visible. And the presence of a man there, skulking through the underbrush, presaged danger, and Luke knew how to act.

Quietly putting away his knife, he waited until the unknown had made another step, and then sprung upon him. In the darkness he could not tell whether the man carried a knife, and his own movements were made in accordance with the possibility. He wound his arms around the man, pinning his hands to his sides, and put forth all his strength to render the hold effectual.

The prisoner bounded like a frightened buck, and Luke was borne back a few paces, but his arms were strong, and that tenacious hold was not to be broken.

"Yield!" he exclaimed, in the unknown's ear.

A muttered curse was the only reply.

"Submit, and your life is in no danger; refuse, and you will have to take the consequences."

"Curse you!" was the retort, "I am one of Boxshot's men."

Luke smiled grimly; he understood the man's error.

"Go out of the bushes and prove it," he replied. "If you do this, all will be well."

"I'm Nat Pickett, and I was stationed here to see that Yank Yellowbird's party didn't get away."

"It does sound like Nat's voice, but come out and we'll have all the crooks made straight."

Luke relaxed his hold, but kept a wary eye on the outlaw. They passed out of the underbrush with Pickett at the head, but as they came in view of Powderfoot, Luke saw fit to cover the prisoner with his revolver. Just then Yank reappeared.

"The coast seems clear," he began; then, seeing the group before him, he broke off suddenly. "Hullo! what in hurley hev we got here?"

"A prisoner."

Pickett uttered a savage exclamation.

"Curse it!" he added, "you fooled me, didn't ye?"

"You made your own mistake. Mountaineer, here is a self-confessed member of Boxshot's gang. He was skulking in the bushes, and I took charge of him."

"You sartainly did wal, lad. No doubt he's the guard we was lookin' fur. Wal, I consait we know how ter deal with him. Don't holler, outlaw, an' we won't do ye no harm; but a squawk means good-by fur you. Powderfoot, I'll trouble ye fur more strings. At this rate we'll have Boxshot men tied all along our line o' march, like mile-posts."

While speaking Yank was not idle. His hands moved with surprising agility, and he was fast reducing the prisoner to a helpless condition. The latter accepted his fate in philosophical silence, but the audible grinding of his teeth showed that there was an inward rebellion.

In a short time he was bound and gagged, and then Yank tied him to a tree. It was the general opinion that no further danger need be feared, and they mounted and rode on together, not a little pleased by their triumph over Boxshot.

Thirty-six hours later found the treasure-hunters once more prepared for gold-digging. Yank and the Pathfinder, had used great care to break their trail, as well as to confuse the pursuers, and they had confidence in the result. Boxshot and his men were not likely to trail them, and the only danger was that they would be found as on a former occasion—by means of a general search.

There was no way to guard against this, and they could only trust to luck and such precautions as they could use.

Another hut was erected in a short time, and then they were ready for work. The new scene of action was a ravine which both the borderers thought bore a resemblance to "Dark Ravine," the place where Ralph Short had wrongly supposed that he buried the gold.

The bed of the ravine was ragged and broken. In several places there were rocky crevices several feet deep, while in others sand filled the crevices to the top. Nothing could be more favorable, at first glance, than this, and they went to work cheerfully and expectantly.

The first crevice cleared did not reveal the buried gold, nor the second, nor the third. In fact, when they ceased for the night they had not even a minute particle of the precious "dust" to gladden their sight.

The ravine, however, would admit of at least three days' more work before they need be discouraged.

The following morning found them out of provisions, with the exception of the few things brought from Black Rock Bend. Game, for some reason, was strikingly scarce, and as it could not be brought down near at hand, it was decided that Laramie Luke should go in search of it. Accordingly, when his companions resumed their picks and spades, he took his rifle and started for what seemed a promising field of action, in a southerly direction.

He had a mile to go before he reached the place in question, but this was soon passed. He then entered a wood of considerable extent and marked grandeur of appearance. He had not come to view the lofty trees, however, and he went on with his mind bent in one channel.

Game must be had.

For some time he wandered about, and nothing crossed the line of his vision. Then he had a surprise; the unmistakable odor of smoke was borne to his nostrils. He at first believed himself mistaken, but when he could no longer doubt he grew more than curious.

The Western wanderer goes to all places, and it was not exactly remarkable that another person should be in the woods; but Luke once remembered the outlaws. Were they again on the scene? He determined to learn.

Using due vigilance, he moved toward the quarter from whence the smoke was borne. The odor grew stronger as he advanced, until a sudden exit from a thicket revealed a dwelling in the wood.

It was no luxurious, or even comfortable one. In size only was it superior to the treasure-hunters' hut, and it had the air of having been hastily constructed. More than this, it seemed of recent make.

Luke paused and looked in wonder. An apology for a chimney had been built at one corner, and from this smoke was slowly curling. It was the only sign of life. Stepping back a little, he gained the cover of a tree, and then determined to watch until the mystery was somewhat cleared away.

He could not but think that the place was unlike an outlaw camp. He associated such a resort with noise, confusion, hilarity and quarreling; but the silence of the wood was in no way disturbed by the singular habitation.

Perhaps ten minutes passed without any change. His gaze had wandered away, drawn by the flight of a small bird. Once more he looked back, and, lo! the scene had radically changed. A man and woman were visible, having evidently come from the building.

A woman in the forest! The interest increased.

Her back was toward Luke but her figure was slight and, he thought, girlish. Some wild-erness rose, no doubt; some stray flower of beauty—

She turned toward him, and all the romance went out of the situation like a flash—the girl was Nell Stebbins!

Completely dumfounded, Luke rubbed his eyes and looked in unbelieving wonder. He could scarcely credit the evidence of his own eyes. Nell—there?

And then he saw the man point to the woods and try to take her hand. She repulsed him with a disdainful gesture, and then walked away. He followed close after her, and the truth was not to be doubted. She was a prisoner! It was evident in every way, but it was no more than he expected. Nell had been left at Black Rock Bend, and Powderfoot, at least, had not dreamed that she would leave it. Clearly, some enemy had been at work, and this was the result.

"By Heavens! I'll have a hand in the game!" Luke exclaimed, taking a forward step.

"Don't do it, young fellow!"

The words were uttered by a cool, sneering voice behind him; Luke wheeled like a flash.

Before him stood Pride Oliver, the outlaw lieutenant.

An amused, but disagreeable, smile was on the man's face. He leaned upon his rifle and surveyed his companion with an irritating, confident look, as though all the power of the land lay in the hollow of his hand.

"You, here!" ejaculated Laramie Luke.

"I am here."

Luke stared at him in silence. The surprise was so great that his mind was not yet clear, but, gradually, self-possession resumed its sway and he grew as cool as ever.

"I think, Mr. Oliver, that you and I need no introduction."

"Not a bit, my dear fellow; don't stand on ceremony. I haven't even a visiting-card with me, though I've ordered some direct from Paris. If you have anything to say, don't wait for etiquette; say it right to the point."

"Thank you for nothing. Is yonder habitation your home?"

"At present, yes."

"I saw a young lady—"

"Daughter of old Powderfoot. Yes; I saw that you recognized her. It's the divine Nell."

"Why is she here?"

"There is a tinge of jealousy in your voice, and if I were a trifling man I should work on your feelings. I won't, however; Nell is here

as my captive, at present; but she is to be my wife as soon as I can discover a minister."

A flush of anger and indignation arose to Luke's face. He glanced backward and saw that Nell was still in sight, walking slowly with her guard—probably for mere exercise—and clearly unconscious of his proximity. He turned steadily to Oliver.

"You speak confidently, Sir Outlaw."

"Yes."

"Do you forget that Miss Stebbins has friends?"

"I am one. I presume, however, that you refer to old Powderfoot, the man Yellowbird and yourself."

"I do."

"What of you three?"

"Simply this: You have taken the young lady from her home; her friends now know of the fact; and she will be rescued. Also, punishment will be meted out to you."

"Do you propose to try it?"

"I do, sir."

Oliver stepped back and looked Luke over from head to foot with a slow, contemptuous gaze.

"Some things strike me as irresistibly comical, and this is one of them," he finally observed. "The airs that some boys put on are productive of hilarious mirth. I have rarely felt more like laughing than I do at this moment, but, out of respect for you, I will only say that you are an ignorant youth who would be more at home in an Eastern parlor than in the woods."

"Talk is cheap," composedly answered Luke.

"You probably think to overawe me, and we will see how you come out. Let me make comparisons, too. In point of years there is not a difference of five years between us; as to border-craft, my experience is my own affair; as to honor, I am immeasurably your superior; and as to muscle, or skill with weapons, I am your equal. If you doubt, try me and see!"

The speaker paused, stretched out one hand toward Nell, and added in a deep voice:

"If you doubt me, let us settle the right to her in equal fight, man to man!"

"Listen to the oracle!" sneered Oliver. "Know, boy, that there is a time and place for all things. Some time in the sweet by-and-by I may engage in a duel with you, but if you are an old card-player, I leave it to you to say if it's a wise man that throws away his good cards and plays with poor ones. My dear sir, look to your right!"

Luke obeyed. He suspected a trick which would give Oliver a chance to attack him unawares, and used due care, but he was speedily undeceived.

There stood two stout men with leveled rifles at their shoulders, the muzzles covering Laramie Luke's breast. He was in a trap.

Oliver laughed mockingly.

"Who wins now, my friend from Laramie?" he demanded. "Your crow won't rise so loud after this, I reckon. Those are my men, and at one word from me they will send two bullets through you. What have you to say? Will you surrender quietly?"

CHAPTER XXII.

LEFT TO HIS FATE.

LARAMIE LUKE stood in painful silence. He knew that he was hopelessly in the outlaw's power; Pride Oliver had the power to carry out his threat, and before the prisoner could raise a hand in self-defense he could be butchered by the lawless trio.

It was a severe experience. Of fear Luke felt nothing, and his pride could bear the shock; but the knowledge that he had, perhaps, lost all hope of rescuing Nell was bitter in the extreme. Oliver had only to murder him, and Powderfoot might never know the fate of his daughter.

All this passed quickly through Luke's mind, and it brought mental pain which was hard to bear. A new light appeared in his eyes, and he turned again to Oliver.

"You say these are your men?"

"So I said."

"Members of Boxshot's band?"

"Yes."

"What do you propose to do with me?"

"You are rushing things, but I will say that I don't know yet. I may send you off the earthly stage, or I may not. One thing you can depend upon—you won't carry the news about Nell to old Powderfoot."

"He will find her."

"No doubt, if we stay here. I reply thus, assuming that your camp is near, a supposed fact of which I was before ignorant. Now that I know it, I shall pull up stakes within the hour, take the divine Nell, and get to new scenes, leaving you in some state not yet decided upon, so that you will not be likely to give anything away to Powderfoot. Nobody but my little party knows that Nell is in my hands, and I don't mean they shall. On the whole, I reckon I had better silence you before I go."

There was a significant emphasis on one word, but Luke did not heed it.

"Pay attention to me," he replied. "You no doubt call yourself a brave man. Well, prove your valor now, if you dare. The advantage of numbers is on your side, but I challenge you to

meet me in single fight, man to man, with any weapon you may name."

"I have answered you once before."

"Pray do so again."

"I decline."

"Are you afraid?"

"Of you?" was the contemptuous retort.

"Of me."

Luke answered steadily, looking Oliver full in the face, but the lieutenant made an impatient gesture.

"I should be a fool to fight a prisoner."

"Then you decline?"

"Yes."

"Pride Oliver, you are afraid."

"Call it what you will," was the curt response. "You cannot force me into this piece of folly; nothing you can say will move me. Arnold, advance and bind the prisoner, while Beck and I hold him where he is. Prisoner, don't dare to resist; we have 'the drop' on you, and you die off-hand if you try to use your own weapons. Bear this in mind."

Oliver had drawn a revolver and leveled it at Luke's breast. Arnold advanced to obey the order given him. Laramie Luke's broad chest arose and fell with suppressed emotion; it was a situation which cut him to the quick, and he longed in vain to see Yank Yellowbird appear. The mountaineer did not come, and Luke was helpless. He knew how mad it would be to dare the weapons leveled at him. One touch of either man's finger would close his earthly career.

Arnold had cords ready for use, and he deftly and securely fastened the prisoner's arms behind him. Oliver looked relieved.

"It's lucky we saw the knave before he did us," he then said, "or we might have had a rusty time. Beck, I don't want the girl to see this fellow. Go to her and Pratt, and bid them get ready to travel. Have the but vacated in ten minutes if you can; then have Pratt lead her well away and wait until we rejoin him. You stay by the but and help Arnold and me."

Beck hastened away, and the lieutenant began pacing back and forth. His face bore a thoughtful look, and he now and then glanced at Luke.

He was doubtless considering how he should dispose of his prisoner.

Arnold, in the meanwhile, kept his revolver ready for use, and, even if Luke's hands had been free, he would have been helpless. Several minutes wore away, and then Oliver aroused. He had seen Nell and her outlaw escort disappear in the wood, and he bade Arnold lead Luke to camp.

Beck joined them near the but.

"I have decided what to do with you," the lieutenant explained, addressing the prisoner. "We will bind you securely to yonder tree, and leave you to your meditations. They may be pleasant during the day, but the scene will change to-night. This is a favorite stamping-ground with grizzly bears, and we had a devil of a time last night; in fact, we decided that our new home had got to be given up on account of the bears. Well, to-night you and they can have it to yourselves, and if the grizzlies don't find something to appease their hunger, I'm no judge!"

Beck and Arnold laughed as though they had heard an extremely good joke. Oliver looked into Luke's face with a sarcastic smile, but he was disappointed if he expected to see the prisoner waver.

"Have it your own way," Luke curtly answered.

"I shall, assuredly. My will is law here."

Luke made no reply, and, after a short pause, the lieutenant directed that the work be finished. The prisoner was placed with his back to a tree, and a rope was then passed around the trunk, and Luke's body, until the strength of a giant could not have broken it. Evidently, the outlaws were no novices at the work.

"We shall have to leave you now," said Oliver, presently. "Have you anything to say before the gag is added?"

"No."

"No message for Nell?"

"None."

Luke answered with irritating coolness.

"Well, I hope you will get along well with the grizzlies, to-night."

No reply.

"Come, can't you say a few farewell words?" the lieutenant mockingly asked.

"If you wish, I can," Luke sternly replied.

"It is your hour of triumph now, sir, but there is nothing more uncertain than the advantages we now and then hold in the affairs of life. Possibly there will be a radical change before night which will raise me up and drop you down. And, sir, if by any chance I get out of this alive, rely upon it—I shall see you again! It may be a sense of satisfaction to you to have made me speak, but if my day ever comes, you will derive no pleasure whatever from the fact that you have made me *ACT*!"

These words were spoken with concentrated anger which made perceptible impression upon Oliver. He hesitated, exhibited irresolution, and then, rallying, tried to make a reply in his old vein, but he was plainly affected by the menace.

For a moment he seemed to consider some

other plan, but his indecision soon passed. At his command a gag was forced into Luke's mouth, and then the trio went to the hut to gather up what few articles remained there. They began to talk, thinking that their words would be inaudible to Luke, but his hearing was better than they imagined.

He heard all distinctly.

"We must do some good work now," said Oliver. "If the friends of the girl get after us the devil will be to pay, and then there is the captain; by this time he is wondering at our absence, and he will soon know the truth."

"He may not," replied Beck.

"Boxshot is no fool, and he hasn't trusted me fully for some time."

"Will he pursue us, d'ye think?"

"I hardly know, but I am still in favor of the bold plan. At least two of the men at the Refuge are my friends, and we can easily get possession; then, let it once come to the point that the boys know a rebellion has broken out, there are plenty of them who have grudges against Boxshot. I'm all in favor of seizing the Refuge, and, my word for it, we'll win."

Arnold shook his head.

"It's a bold undertaking."

"Bold undertakings are just what succeed."

"If we fail, Link Boxshot would give the whole gang of us a taste of torture which would out-do the old-time inquisition."

"Well, if we don't make a rebellion, what are we to do? We are homeless. We can't go to Black Rock Bend, and we can't return to Boxshot's fold. What can we do?"

"Thar's somethin' in that, an' we'll consider it over night," Beck interrupted.

"So be it; we'll be off now."

They started. Their course took them near Luke, and, as they went, Oliver waved his hand and uttered a mocking farewell. Luke could not have replied if he wished, which he did not. The trio went on; and the trees soon hid them from sight.

Naturally, the prisoner's first movement was to try his bonds. He had seen the work done, and had then been convinced that they would defy all his efforts, but it was not in human nature to stand idly there. He made a strong, steady, practical effort, but the ropes held firmly. They were neither new nor strong, but there were enough of them to defy him—or, more properly speaking, the single rope which confined him to the tree, was passed three times around that object and his own body.

After spending several minutes unavailingly in this way, he devoted his attention to the gag. If he could remove it, so that he could use his voice, he might possibly make Yank and Powderfoot hear. He had more than himself to work for; Nell Stebbins was in the hands of unscrupulous foes.

The thought gave him keen pain.

The gag proved as obstinate as the bonds, and he returned to the latter and worked until he was weary and discouraged.

Such was the history of the day. At intervals he tried to release himself, but always unavailingly. The skin was nearly all worn from his wrists; he was weary, sore and lame; and his jaws ached from the action of the gag. Frequently he turned his gaze toward the treasure-seekers' camp, hoping to see Yank or Powderfoot, but always to meet with disappointment.

Night drew near.

As dark shadows began to fall among the trees, he recalled what Pride Oliver had said about the grizzlies. If it was a favorite resort with them, he was in imminent danger. One might appear at any moment, and he certainly was not in condition to meet it. An infant would not have been more helpless.

Once more he struggled to break or loosen his bonds; once more he scored a failure. Then he settled back with a sort of sullen despair. He could meet a foe bravely in battle, with the odds against him, but a situation like that was bitter in the extreme.

And the fast-advancing shadows of night fell more deeply, somberly and gloomily in the forest.

CHAPTER XXIII.

KANSAS KITTEN INVESTIGATES.

WHEN Steele Griffith entered the Mission-office, unexpectedly interrupting the conversation between his wife and Kansas Kitten, there was momentary danger of trouble. Both the latter were agitated, and it would have been great presence of mind which would enable them to assume a demeanor calculated to avert his suspicions.

Mrs. Griffith knew this, and fear seized upon her. She knew by past experience that Steele was jealous, and inclined to magnify trifles. It seemed impossible that he would be content to look upon the present case lightly. Certainly, if he recognized Kansas Kitten, as she had done, there would be the worst kind of trouble.

It seemed to her like a Providential interposition when, an instant later, Albert Brandreth came bustling into the office from the main room.

"The Indian children seem very promising," he said cheerfully, "and Miss Stebbins is hard

at work with them. She bids me say that she would like to have you come in at once, Mrs. Griffith. Ah! Mr. Griffith, is it you? I didn't notice you at first. Pleased to see you."

It was a most fortunate diversion. Steele had not had time to analyze the faces before him when the missionary appeared, and by the time he had finished speaking, all signs of agitation had disappeared from the faces of Mrs. Griffith and Kansas Kitten.

With a great effort they recovered their self-possession.

"I will go to Nell in a moment," Marion answered, in her most natural voice. "Steele, aren't you surprised to see me here?"

"I am, indeed; I didn't think you strong enough."

"I am afraid I was not strong enough, but I took the fancy to see Nell, and here I am. Are you going to the house?"

"No; at least, such was not my intention."

"I didn't know but you were. I shall only stay here a short time."

"Then I will walk home with you."

Steele cast a suspicious glance toward Kansas Kitten as he spoke. He had by no means abandoned his doubts in that direction. The Kitten had proved what seemed a satisfactory *alibi* by Ishmael Lee, but Steele was not satisfied. His wounded arm, as well as the haunting fears aroused by his night visitor, spurred him on to find a man who could be made to suffer, and though he could see nothing suspicious about the boy from Wildcat, nor any reason why he should lie, he could not regard Kansas Kitten as proven innocent.

He was obliged, however, to admit that his convictions seemed to partake of obstinacy.

Mrs. Griffith said a few graceful words to Mr. Brandreth, smiled upon her husband, and went into the next room. Kansas Kitten did not get even a glance—for which he was sincerely pleased.

The three men were left together.

"Our school is growing, Mr. Griffith," said the missionary, wholly unconscious of the fact that such antagonistic elements were around him. "Every week beholds a favorable advance. When I came here there were many who thought that I was making a mistake, but I calculated on the advance of civilization, and, thank Providence! we are now on a good basis. Our paying pupils give us something to lay out in missionary work. All of this is used right here at home. I may be wrong, Mr. Griffith, but I am not in very strong sympathy with foreign missions at remote points. It is my theory that we have enough poor, ignorant, suffering, mind-darkened persons right in our own country to absorb all our time and our money."

Mr. Brandreth was started on his favorite subject, and once more he did good by preventing general conversation.

Aside from the doubts before mentioned, Griffith found time to recollect that his wife and Kansas Kitten had been the only occupants of the office when he arrived. He felt a pang of jealousy. Then he looked attentively at the Kitten.

He saw a stout, squat, ill-shaped figure; a round, red, dirt-streaked face; matted, shaggy hair and beard; and, as the Kitten watched Brandreth, dull, sleepy eyes, which certainly did not seem to indicate great intelligence.

Steele smiled contemptuously, and the last shadow of jealousy disappeared.

But the dull eyes lighted up when the superintendent ceased speaking.

"Maow! Them's my sentiments, too," declared the Kitten. "Thar's a right way an' a wrong way ter do things, an' it stan's ter reason the right way is the best way. Wal, I should maow! Now, ef I had the gifts o' speech an' fitness, nothin' would please me more'n ter become a missionary, but I'm too dogmatic a feline fur that. My pulse ain't right fur reel, onadulterated goodness."

And he gravely felt of his wrist.

"An ignorant fool!" thought Steele Griffith. "I'll give him no more thought."

He was inclined at that moment to think the Kitten innocent of all connection with the trouble at the store, for the man "Hague" had certainly been anything but a fool. So he sat down and talked pleasantly enough, and half an hour soon passed. Then one of the Mission pupils came to ask if Steele was going toward home, as his wife was ready.

They went together, and Kansas Kitten was not mentioned. Indeed, Marion's condition occupied the attention of both. It was plain that she had over-taxed her strength by going to the Mission, and she was greatly exhausted when she reached home. The "model husband" was duly sympathetic, and he insisted upon her taking a dose of the amber-hued cordial at once.

Then he went back to the store.

He could see that Marion was failing, and would have been in good spirits had it not been for haunting memories of the scene in the store that night. It did not need the occasional twinges which his arm gave him, to recall Hague.

His mind was in a condition worse than that of his arm.

Whoever Hague was, he knew a most unsavory chapter in Steele's past life, and the plotter was afraid of him. That story, told at the Bend, would ruin him, especially as Mary Sherwin was such a favorite. For awhile Steele's mind dwelt upon Mary. Did she know of the past? Hague had declared that she did not, but Steele had often noticed that she seemed to avoid him, and it did not look likely to him that she should be ignorant of the chief events in her mother's life.

"I'm going to test the matter, right away," he decided. "If she goes to walk to-day I'll accost her. Nell will no doubt be dancing attendance on my precious wife—*dear Nell!*—and Mary will go alone. I've always had a shivering feeling along my nerves when I've looked at her, all on account of that old affair, but I reckon I can summon up courage."

He drummed idly upon his desk, forgetful of business, of which there was none in the store then; in fact, nearly all the trade came in the evening.

"Then there is the man, Kansas Kitten," he thought. "What of him? My mind whistles around strangely as to him. He looks and acts like an ignorant clown, but appearances are not always to be trusted. I am not yet sure that Kansas Kitten is not a dangerous person!"

He scowled and pounded his knuckles viciously upon the desk, causing Nat Westcott, the clerk, to look at him curiously.

"The boss seems to be in a tantrum," thought honest Nat. "He's got an ugly look, too, and I don't trust him to any great extent. People here say he's an angel, but I'll bet he sprouts hoofs and horns before he does wings!"

In the meanwhile, Kansas Kitten was congratulating himself on the successful end of the encounter with Griffith. He did not feel the slightest awe of that gentleman, but he had the most important of reasons why he did not want to arouse suspicions in Steele's mind.

The interview with Mrs. Griffith had left the Kitten in a gloomy frame of mind, and he left the Mission as soon as he could. Solitude was what he most craved just then. Marion's face had brought up memories of the past which were far from pleasant, and he felt like withdrawing himself from the gaze of all his fellow beings.

Black Rock, frowning down upon the village, seemed to offer itself as a refuge, and he went that way. Passing around the southern corner, he was moving along the beach-like border of the river when he came face to face with Ishmael Lee.

Both paused, and the Kitten forgot personal troubles in the interest which the boy from Wildcat had for him.

"Out fur a walk, I see," observed the elder man.

"Just so," Ishmael replied.

"Fine scene, hyar."

"Yes."

"By the way, I haven't had a chance ter speak wi' yer sence the mornin' you stood *alibi* fur me?"

"No."

Ishmael answered indifferently.

"I owe ye thanks—"

"You are wrong," the boy interrupted. "You thanked me at the time, and all was said that was necessary."

"But," persisted Kansas Kitten, "I owe ye more than thanks. You said you was with me, when ye wa'n't, an' tharby cleared me—though the Lord knows I wa'n't guilty!—an' it was uncommon kind o' you."

"Mr. Kansas Kitten," steadily replied the boy from Wildcat, "up to the present time I have not for a moment regretted that I told a lie to get you out of trouble. Don't make me regret it now by talking folly."

"Maow!" good-humoredly continued the Kitten. "I hear, an' I will obey. But it's funny who did try ter rob Griffith, ain't it?"

"Very funny," was the cool reply.

"Do you s'pose they'll ketch him?"

"I am afraid not, for, you know, there is no detective at Black Rock Bend!"

Ishmael spoke the word "detective" with emphasis, looking straight into his companion's eyes, and for just the briefest space of time the Kitten's own gaze wavered. Then he recovered and laughed lightly.

"Possibly ef thar was a detective hyar, he wouldn't arrest the criminal."

"He wouldn't unless he knew who it was."

"An' he might not ef he did know. Detectives are only human; they don't go about like ravenin' wolves, seekin' whom they may devour an' eat up. S'pose a detective knew a sartin party had done some queer caper, but he'd studied the party wal, an' knowed him ter be an honest chap with some great work ter do—or s'pose the party had done the detective a service. D'ye s'pose the detective would be so bound up in duty he'd pounce on that party? Bet yer life, he wouldn't!"

The speaker now took his turn and looked sharply at Ishmael, and the boy's cheeks assumed additional color. He looked earnestly, almost anxiously and pathetically, at the Kitten.

"That man is truly noble who is kind and

forbearing to the helpless and unfortunate," he answered, somewhat unsteadily.

"Right!" coincided the Kitten, with a nod; "an' such persons—the unfortunate, I mean—kin rely on me ter be their friend."

CHAPTER XXIV.

MARY'S CHAMPION.

KANSAS KITTEN and Ishmael looked at each other with friendly eyes. There had been some suggestive remarks; words had been said which were well-aimed and went straight to the target; and they understood each other better than before. Each knew that his own, and his companion's armor was not bullet-proof, and they had made their knowledge known.

That each had a secret was clear; that each had come to the Bend with a mission the other felt sure; but neither knew what secret his companion held wrapped about him as a garment.

Ishmael now showed signs of weakness. His usual coolness was shaken. He felt that he was not able to successfully cope with the Kitten; he bent, reed-like, as the weaker mind bends to the stronger; and when he clearly understood that the strong man was inclined to be his friend and sympathizer, this kindness weakened him more than harshness would have done.

The one he was accustomed to; the other he was not.

There was an awkward pause, and then he slowly said:

"I think you and I can be friends, sir."

"No doubt on't, my lad."

"I thank you sincerely."

"Possibly I'm hard-headed, coarse an' ignorant," the Kitten went on, "but I've got human feelin's. It's the place o' strong men ter be helpers o' the weak an' unfortinit. Now, ef any one—say a woman, or a child, or any deservin' person—come ter me an' said, 'I'm in trouble an' need help!' I'd say ter that person, be it who it might: 'Tell me your story, an' ef I find you all I think, I'm ready ter help ye.' An' I would do it, sure as you live. The world would be better, brighter an' happier, ef we had more good will ter our kind, but we can't work in the dark."

"What you say is true, on general principles, but suppose the unfortunate person could not well tell his secret?"

"I should advise him to tell it."

"But if it was impossible?"

Kansas Kitten rubbed the end of his red nose thoughtfully.

"I don't see how that kin be."

"Still, it might."

"I s'pose so."

The Kitten spoke doubtfully, as though he could not see any such possibility, but his manner was as friendly as ever. There was a brief silence, during which he looked meditatively at the flowing water of the river. He felt assured that Ishmael would make no explanation then, and was not inclined to alarm him by urging the point.

It was the boy who broke the silence.

"I shall have to leave you now, sir," he said, "but I hope to meet you again. Your kind words have been pleasant to me, and—I am glad that I was able to help you the other day."

It needed no deep thought to show Kansas Kitten that the boy was anxious to have the *alibi* kept in mind.

"You did nobly, an' I won't forget it, Ishmael. Ef you need a good turn at any time, come to me; I shall be glad to give you a lift. What is more, nobody shall know from me what has passed between us, ter-day."

"Nor from me," Ishmael replied, with emphasis. "Great harm is often done by saying too much. And now—good-by until I see you again!"

He smiled, waved his hand and walked away. Kansas Kitten watched him thoughtfully until he disappeared, and then, himself, turned and walked along the river-bank. His mind was busy with thoughts and suspicions of no small moment, but all was vague and uncertain. That Ishmael was at the Bend on work of importance was clear, and the Kitten determined to devote what time he could spare from other interests to the case.

Presently his mind drifted back to Marion Griffith, and the boy from Wildcat was forgotten. What business complication is equal to personal matters, when one's heart is full of bitter pain and vain regrets?

Certainly, Kansas Kitten had enough food for thought, and, entering the wood, he did not come out again until the sun was well down the western sky. Solitude had done him good; he had conquered his weakness in a measure; and as he walked homeward he was, in appearance, once more the careless, good-humored vagabond of the woods.

As he neared Black Rock he noticed a girl walking toward him, and at once recognized Mary Sherwin; but, in a moment more, he was surprised to see Steele Griffith emerge from the bushes and accost her. Kansas Kitten paused. He saw that Mary started perceptibly, and tried to walk on with only a bow to Griffith, but the latter spoke persistently to her and she paused.

A keen light shot into Kansas Kitten's eyes,

and with a quick movement he gained the shelter of the bushes. Then, quickly but cautiously, he began to move toward them. He was resolved to overhear their conversation if it was possible.

Some time was consumed in making the movement, owing to the bushes, but he was at length successful. Griffith was speaking when he arrived.

"I don't understand your aversion to me, Miss Sherwin."

"Who says that I feel any?"

"Your manner indicates it."

"We don't always judge correctly."

"Just what I wish to say to you, considering the way you treat me."

"Excuse me, sir," Mary answered, with spirit, "but I fail to see that I am answerable to you in any way for my conduct. Certainly, I decline to be criticised by you."

"Don't let us quarrel," more pacifically continued Griffith. "I don't mean to be severe; all I want is to defend myself. From the time you first came to the Bend you have avoided me. You would talk in a friendly way to others, but never to me. Heaven knows I did not seek your society, for you are a single lady and I have the best of wives; but I saw your antipathy evinced every time we met. Now, let me ask if I have ever failed to show proper respect for you?"

"You have not."

"Have I forced my company upon you?"

"No."

"Have I done you any injustice?"

"Not to my knowledge."

"Then what is the meaning of your aversion to me?"

"I don't know."

"That is no answer."

"It is the truth, nevertheless."

"Will you explain what you mean?"

Mary made an impatient gesture.

"Since you are so persistent I will; and I will try to make myself understood, though I deny your right to ask for such an explanation. No one is obliged to make an undesirable acquaintance, and we often wish not to make a certain acquaintance without knowing why it is thus. So with me. When I met you I did not like you, and time has not changed my views. That is the whole secret in few words."

"You are frank at any rate."

"Wasn't it your wish?"

"It was, and I am much obliged. One word more. Did you ever hear of me before you came to the Bend?"

Mary looked surprised.

"No, sir; I never did."

"Ah! Well, Miss Sherwin, I will now prove to you that I am not the devouring monster you think me to be. I will open a way to you to improve your worldly position, and, at the same time, go where my face will never appear to trouble you. At a certain town a hundred miles southeast of here a teacher is wanted in a peaceful, promising school, and the salary offered is within one dollar of double your present pay. I have secured the chance of filling this position, and if you will accept it, 'tis yours from this moment. What do you say?"

The girl had listened patiently, but her sparkling eyes should have warned Griffith.

"I say, no!" she vehemently exclaimed.

"Whatever your motive is for making this offer, I reject it with scorn. I have doubted you ever since we met at this place, and, now, I doubt you more than ever. I refuse the offer."

"Don't be hasty—"

"I refuse the offer!"

The girl's voice was firm and unwavering.

"Think again. Money is no trifling matter—"

"I refuse the offer!" she reiterated. "Do you think me so blind that I cannot see there is something behind all this? Very unsophisticated you must think me, sir, but you may find yourself mistaken. Not under any condition would I accept a favor from your hands; while as for you, Mr. Griffith, it would be more to your credit if, instead of occupation like this, you devoted yourself to the noble woman who is your wife. Go to her, sir, and make real the devotion you so hypocritically profess to feel for her!"

Steele's face grew white with mingled anger and alarm. He grasped Mary's wrist fiercely, losing all self-control.

"Girl, what do you mean?" he hissed.

Mary had been carried away by her indignation, but his rough hold and his ominous expression recalled her to practical life. Terror seized upon her, and she tried to free her hand.

"Let me go!" she gasped.

"Not until you explain!" he hissed; and was about to throw his arm around her waist when something cold and hard was thrust into his face with a force which made him recoil.

It was the muzzle of a revolver.

Releasing his hold he started back a pace, and then paused, staring blankly at the person who stood there with a revolver leveled at his head. The new-comer was Ishmael Lee.

Pale as death was the face of the boy from Wildcat, and his eyes had a wild, unnatural glare, but the hand which held that revolver

was almost as steady as though carved of marble.

"Stand back!" he exclaimed, in a tense voice. Steele Griffith did not answer. He was startled and dismayed; he would never have laid hand upon Mary had he not lost his usual coolness; and the sharp recall to common sense seemed to turn to ice those emotions which had, a moment before, been at boiling pitch. He did not fear the pale-faced boy, nor the revolver which covered his head, but it flashed upon him that this affair, if made public, would shake the reputation he had laboriously built up.

His anger turned against the boy. "You little scoundrel!" he snarled, "how dare you draw a revolver upon me?"

"How dare you molest yonder girl?" was the steady retort.

"She and I can settle our affair without your aid."

"It will be settled with my aid. I am here as her friend, and as your enemy."

"You!" Steele contemptuously retorted. "A puny boy, whom I could crush with one hand!"

"A weapon like the one I hold," was the reply, "makes the weak the equals of the strong."

"We will see," hotly ejaculated Griffith. "I allow no one to bully me, and I will break your head if you do not beg my pardon and leave here. Drop that revolver!"

CHAPTER XXV.

NELL EXPRESSES HER OPINION.

ONE witness of this scene had not yet made himself seen. Kansas Kitten had heard all, and, when Griffith seized Mary, he was about to go to her aid when Ishmael burst out of the bushes and assumed such an important role. After that the Kitten remained quiet—he had the best of reasons for not wanting Steele to regard him with especial hostility; and though he had drawn a revolver and was ready for action, if radical necessity demanded it, he was determined to keep in hiding if he could.

Pale was Ishmael's face, but Griffith's threat did not make him waver.

"I shall not drop the revolver," he responded, his voice growing firmer than ever, "and I warn you not to molest me. As surely as I have strength to press the trigger I will shoot you!"

"I have a revolver, too."

"Try to draw it, and I fire!" Ishmael retorted.

There was a pause. The boy did not waver, and Mary was far cooler than before. She glanced toward the village, tempted to scream for help. Griffith saw the glance, and it did much to recall his senses; to show him the precipice over which he stood. He laughed uneasily.

"We are coming the heroic here," he said, "and all for nothing. Nobody means any great harm, I think. Under some circumstances, boy, I would give you a chastisement for your insolence, but I do not forget that I was hasty, myself."

He paused, struggled for a plausible excuse, and added:

"The fact is, I made a friendly offer with the best of motives, and Miss Sherwin misunderstood it. More, she received it in a way which made me very angry; it is pretty severe on an honest man to have his motive questioned, when he tries to do good. I lost my temper, as I before said, and was indiscreet."

Another pause, and then, looking at Ishmael, he viciously added:

"Your conduct was outrageous!"

"Never mind that," the boy answered. "Fine analyses are unnecessary. Miss Sherwin is about to leave here under my escort; all we ask of you is that you will let us alone."

Steele clinched his hands nervously. He longed to annihilate the beardless youth who had baffled him, but further trouble would irretrievably ruin him at the Bend. Probably it was done already, or would be as soon as the couple could tell their story. The small hope that it was otherwise determined Griffith to bear his discomfiture; he had interests at the Bend too great to be thrown away to gratify a spite against the youth from Wildcat.

"Have no fear," he said, in reply to Ishmael. "Nobody is less desirous of trouble than I. This has been an era of misunderstandings, and it is best we should end it. One last word to Miss Sherwin. I hope, young lady, that you will some day realize how much you have wronged me with your unjust suspicions. That is all I have to say."

He raised his hat politely and walked away toward the village, never looking back.

"The double-faced scoundrel!" muttered Ishmael.

Mary drew a long, quivering breath.

"This has been a terrible experience."

"Yes."

Ishmael answered mechanically, watching Griffith.

"I cannot express how much I thank you," Mary added.

"Don't mention it," was the quick reply, and Ishmael flashed a glance at her. "I should have been a creature of stone not to throw my sympathies with you."

"You have my deepest gratitude, anyway."

"The reward is all I could wish," the boy replied, his voice far from steady.

"You are very brave."

Ishmael laughed shortly, unpleasantly.

"Recklessness and despair sometimes create bravery."

"Are you in despair?" Mary asked, sympathetically.

"I? Oh! no; there is no reason why I should be. My life runs along as smoothly as yonder river. There may be a pitfall, or whirlpool, or a snag, here and there, but my life and the river go on. The one will be lost in the Atlantic Ocean; the other in the ocean of death and eternity."

"This is singular talk for one of your age," Mary observed, looking wonderingly at her companion.

"Young as I am, I have had time to think," the boy went on, steadily. "Among other things I have thought of death. I can see nothing dreadful about it. To those who are happy, and must give up friends, home, love and, perhaps, wealth, the end of life is something to be deferred as long as possible; but the friendless and wretched know no such feelings. Crushed by the hopeless sorrow of years of misfortune, the unfortunates see death coming without a fear—ay, the touch of his cold hand, the sweeping chill of his icy breath, and resistless beckoning of his finger, may be welcome. The pangs of dissolution are soon past, and then—what? I know not, but one thing is sure—life, hard, bitter, wretched life is past!"

The boy from Wildcat abruptly replaced his revolver in his pocket and turned away.

"Come," he added; "I will walk with you to the Mission."

Mary went in silence. She had had a glimpse of her companion's mind which saddened her. She was alone in the world, but no especial misfortune had ever fallen with crushing weight upon her. She felt pity for Ishmael, but did not understand how she was to offer sympathy.

When they were gone Kansas Kitten slowly arose to his feet.

"There are more things in heaven and earth than we dream of," he muttered. "The boy puzzles me. I think I have a part of his secret, but that is more yet. What it is I am going to discover. Events are movin' on, an' thar may be a surprise party in this town before many days."

Mary and Ishmael went directly to the Mission Annex, and then the girl went to her room. She had not mentioned her adventure to any one, and was not sure that she would.

Nell Stebbins returned from her visit to Mrs. Griffith in time for supper, but was very silent during the meal. Now that Powderfoot was away, she was making her home entirely at the Annex, and it was the custom of the various inmates to pass the evenings together.

On this occasion, however, Nell seized the chance to secretly ask Mary to retire to their room, which they shared together, at once.

"I am out of spirits," she added, "and can't endure the company of all these nobodies for two hours."

Mary was not reluctant, and they went accordingly, but it was some time before Nell's thoughtful mood vanished. She tried to keep up conversation, but her thoughts plainly wandered, and she was wholly unlike her usual bright self.

At length, however, she aroused and became so bright and cheerful that Mary, who felt a strong desire to have at least one confidante, determined to tell the story of her experience with Griffith. She did so, and was rewarded with rapt attention on Nell's part, though the Pathfinder's daughter made no interruptions.

Her cheeks flushed with excitement, however, and nothing escaped her.

When Mary finished, Nell spoke in a manner unusually quiet for her.

"I am not surprised."

"I know you have never liked Steele Griffith."

"The trouble was, he liked me too well. It is no honor—quite the reverse—so I shall not be accused of vanity when I say that I have long known that he had a fancy for me, the contemptible villain!—and he with a wife as noble as woman can be. Of course he has not been at all bold; I must confess, he has been quite respectful; but I read him well. Let that pass, however. I have more to say about Mr. Steele Griffith."

"Something new?"

"Yes."

There was a singular expression on Nell's face. She hesitated for a moment, and then added:

"Mary, to what point do you think that man's villainy would go?"

"I don't know," Mary replied, somewhat startled.

Bending forward, Nell whispered:

"Do you think it would go to—murder?"

Mary started back and grew pale.

"Murder!" she echoed.

"Yes. The word has a bad sound, don't it? It has to me, anyway, for it is getting near home. For a long time I have had certain suspicions in regard to him, but I have tried to convince myself that I was mistaken. I never

quite succeeded, and it would take strong evidence now."

"I don't understand."

"I will try to explain, and avoid all undue sensationalism. Ever since the Griffiths came here I have been puzzled as to Marion's condition. We early took a fancy to each other, and as a result of our friendship I have been there a good deal, and have had extra good chances to observe and study."

"Not long did it take me to decide that Steele Griffith was a hypocrite, if not a thorough villain; I decided that his show of love for his wife was only a pretense. When they came to the Bend they brought a large supply of medicines, and these have been in Griffith's charge—he pretends to have some medical knowledge. One day, when I was at the house, he went to what he calls his office to mix a medicine for Marion, which was made of three or four simple articles. He had been gone but a few moments when Marion remembered that she had a little of the mixture left, and sent me to tell him."

"When I reached the door of his 'office,' he was just pouring a liquid from a small bottle into a large one, which already held a quantity of something. When he heard me he put the small bottle quickly back in the medicine-chest. I went forward, and my gaze at once rested upon a bottle which I thought was the one he had replaced; and I was startled when I saw a label upon it which said: 'Poison!'"

"This was before I began to have suspicions in regard to him, and I spoke bluntly about the matter. He insisted that the bottle I had seen him have was quite a different one, and laughed the matter down, even mentioning it promptly to Marion. As I had only suspected him of a mistake, all was soon made right in my sight, and the incident passed away."

"Later came my doubts of Griffith; the conviction that he did not care for Marion, but that he wished her out of the way; and his ill-disguised fancy for me. I knew then that he was a hypocrite. As you know, Marion was improving steadily, if not rapidly, until a few days ago. Then came the relapse, and she complained of entirely new symptoms, which puzzled me. It was then that I began to suspect in earnest. All my respect for Griffith was gone; and I remembered the bottle labeled poison, and grew startled at my own ideas."

"This afternoon, when I went to see Marion, she told me that her visit to the Mission had been attended with ill results; soon after her return she had been attacked with nausea, and had vomited freely. I questioned her, and learned that, when she reached home, her husband had given her a dose of an amber-hued medicine she is taking. The nausea began ten minutes afterward."

"I wanted to look at this amber-colored medicine more closely, and did so. It was while I was thus occupied that I made a discovery. On the table, near the bottle, was a small quantity of a peculiar-looking, grayish-colored powder, and plastered on the top of the bottle was a small something which, on examination, proved to be the same powder, dampened. Some of it had adhered to the inside of the top of the bottle, and the cork had pressed it against the glass."

"I mentioned this to Marion, or rather, showed her the powder on the table—I did not mention the portion in the bottle—and she said that she knew nothing about it. My own manner was as quiet as I could make it, and she carelessly gave the opinion that Steele had dropped some cigar-ashes."

"This did not satisfy me, and I secretly tasted of the gray powder. It had a peculiar taste, very different from cigar-ashes. Marion was still unsuspecting, and I questioned her as skillfully as I could. I learned that, at first, the amber-hued cordial had done her good, but, of late, it had seemed to have an opposite effect. I learned, too, that she had at first mixed it herself, but that, about the time her relapse began, Griffith suddenly took an interest, and insisted upon mixing it. Again, I learned that when he did the mixing he always contrived to leave the room."

"I am grouping these last facts to make them strike you forcibly, but I drew them from Marion so delicately that she suspected nothing whatever."

"Now, I am satisfied that Griffith is slowly poisoning his wife, and to-morrow night I am going to secretly become an inmate of the house and see if I can detect him in his infamous work."

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE SHADOW OF DANGER.

THERE was momentary silence in the room, and Mary sat looking blankly at her friend. The terrible revelation filled her with surprise and horror, but the story was so long that she had in a measure recovered her presence of mind when Nell's last declaration was unexpectedly flung at her.

"Oh! Nell, Nell!" she exclaimed.

"Yes," was the quiet reply.

"Surely you wouldn't do that!"

"Do what?" Nell innocently asked.

"You said you were going to Griffith's house, and try to detect him, at night."

"That is precisely what I said, my dear."

"Are you mad, Nell?"

"I think not, but I want to know what is done there. If he is trying to poison Marion the fact would never be discovered by asking Mr. Brandreth or the other men of the town to look it up. Strategy is the means, and I am the instrument. I shall be in the house to-morrow night, but neither Griffith nor Marion will suspect it."

"But think of the danger."

The little woman threw her fair head back proudly.

"I am the daughter of Powderfoot, the Pathfinder," she steadily replied.

"But how are you to get into the house?"

"I have bribed Dorcas Strong."

"I wouldn't dare trust her."

"Nor I, unless she was well paid, but money is the royal road to many a heart, and Dorcas is no exception to the rule. Having sold herself to me, she will naturally keep quiet and try to keep Steele Griffith ignorant of the fact."

"And you have really made such an arrangement with her?"

"Yes."

"Oh! Nell, Nell!" exclaimed Mary, both shocked and frightened.

"What would you have? I believe that Marion is being slowly murdered. Would you have the work go on?"

"You know I would not, but it is not your place to undertake such a serious task."

"I believe it is my place and duty. What man of the Bend could manage such a delicate work? We have no detectives, or officers, or legal head. Could Mr. Brandreth do the work? Would he even believe the charge? I tell you it is for me to do it. Dorcas Strong says she can hide me, and when Griffith comes home I expect him to betray himself. No doubt you will say that it is one chance in a hundred. Perhaps it is so, but on that one chance may rest Marion's life."

"But what if Griffith discovers you?"

"I shall carry a revolver."

Mary could find no words of reply. She was as brave as the average woman, but she lacked courage to make such an attempt as the one marked out. It was very like Powderfoot's daughter, but wholly beyond Mary's capabilities.

"Now listen to me," resumed Nell. "There is one person in Griffith's store whose co-operation I want, if my plan fails. I refer to Nat Westcott, and you and I know the bond which will attach him to our cause; he admires you."

"But what can he do?"

"Nothing, if I succeed; much, perhaps, if I fail. I don't know where Griffith keeps his poison. Formerly, the medicine-chest was kept locked; now it is left open boldly. I reason like this: The first poison he used was a liquid, and was kept locked in the chest; but when, for some reason, he changed the kind, it was a powder and could be more easily handled. I believe that he carries it all the time in his pocket, and I want Nat Westcott to secure it if I fail."

"We can certainly try—and why not let Nat undertake it first, and save you all this terrible risk?"

"Suppose that Nat found it in Griffith's pocket, and brought it to us? What proof would we have that any of it was ever administered to Marion?"

"I am helpless," murmured Mary.

"I am not!" retorted Nell. "I am going to the house to-morrow night, and try to catch Griffith in the act of using the gray powder."

"But I don't believe he would have been so careless as to scatter it on the table if it was poison."

"You are wearing the word 'but' threadbare, my dear. As to your last objection, there are many ways of explaining it. Very likely he poured some of the powder in the bottle and, being nervous, spilled what I found. He may not have noticed it, or he may have intended to brush it away and forgot it—Marion says he left the house in a hurry."

Nell faced every objection firmly, and Mary utterly failed to move her. The latter fully understood the danger of the night adventure. Griffith's fancy for Nell might be strong, but who is safe with a detected murderer? If Nell managed to leave the house unseen by Griffith all might be well, whether she gained proof or not; but if she was discovered, and he knew that his secret was known—what then?

Mary shivered at the thought.

She realized full well that Nell might be risking her life on the cast of a die when she entered the house of crime. Mary believed that she had gained an insight into Griffith's real character that day, and she was ready to believe any evil of him. Nell's enterprise looked like defying fate, and Mary felt a sense of evil to come which hung over her like a terrible nightmare.

"Don't worry," advised Nell. "You will see that it will all come out well—at least, I hope so. In any case, if Dorcas Strong don't prove treacherous, I shall secretly enter Griffith's house at nine o'clock to-morrow night!"

While Nell and Mary were still talking a scene was transpiring in Steele Griffith's store

which, considered in its bearings, upon Nell's hazardous project was of unusual interest.

Griffith was a busy man in those days, and, as on several previous occasions, he had a visitor at the store immediately after ostensibly closing for the night. This man, who came by appointment, was named Beck. He lived in the village, and called himself a hunter, scout and guide. He was often absent for days at a time, and was not regarded at the Bend as a particularly desirable citizen, though nobody there actually knew evil of him.

Griffith first furnished him with a chair, and then brought out a whisky-flask to which the visitor readily paid his respects. Then the host plunged into business at once.

"Mr. Beck, I believe you are a sensible man."

"I try ter be."

"No nonsense about you, eh?"

"Not a bit."

"Possibly, too, you are willing to make a dollar?"

"You can bet high on that."

"How is your conscience?"

Beck looked craftily at the questioner.

"That's a piece of lumber I don't carry 'round with me," he deliberately replied.

"Good! Now I want a man who will serve me well for proper pay. There is nothing radical to be done; I don't want to deprive any one of life—Heaven forbid!"

"I reckon you can count me in," Beck answered, with a knowing look. "I'm not a hard man to make a bargain with, an' as my conscience won't kick up a row, you may call me your man an' go ahead."

"Good! Well, I will first call your attention to what I am told is a map of this immediate section. I want you to look at this map, and see if you can distinguish the various rivers, mountains, and so forth, laid down upon it. Is your knowledge of the north woods sufficient for that?"

"You bet it is. Few men know the woods as well as me."

"You shall see the map."

Steele went to his desk. He had made a careful copy of the map which he had vainly tried to study out alone—except that one important mark upon it had been omitted. That mark indicated the alleged location of the Buried Treasure.

He spread the paper out in front of Beck.

"Now see if you can explain this," he added.

Beck was by no means an extremely ignorant man. He had attended school in his younger days, and drawn rough maps when there. The knowledge of olden times served him well now, and his finger at once fell upon the broadest mark of all.

"Hyar's the river," he said.

"Exactly."

"An' hyar are the small streams that empty inter it; an' the hills up north, with the biggest valleys an' gulches marked out quite distinct."

"Can you identify them?"

"That's Tiger Tail Creek; that's Windin' Run; an' that's Dragon Run. That valley is Five Mile Hollar, an' thar is Eagle Gulch."

Griffith's eyes were sparkling. What was an unsolvable jumble of signs to him was plain reading to the wood-rover. The plotter took care not to give the alarm, but asked the name of one locality after another. When he was through, if Beck and the map were reliable, he knew exactly where to look for the Buried Treasure. True, he could not go to it alone, but he had the name of the landmarks.

He leaned back in his chair in a satisfied way.

"Mr. Beck, can you guide me to any locality I may designate there?"

"I can, sir."

"Are you willing to do it—for good pay—and at the same time preserve utter silence?"

"I am," was the prompt reply.

"Will you, then, come to my house, to-morrow night, all ready for the journey? Mind, it is to be a secret journey. No outsider must know of it. I think the whole work can be done in thirty-six hours, including the traveling. I shall give out word that I am called away on business, which will make everything right in my quarter. I will furnish you with all you desire. You, of course, have your weapons; bring them, though I do not expect there will be occasion to use them. I will furnish you with a horse and all other things. I will pay you ten dollars for the trip, with a much larger sum if we are successful. What do you say?"

Beck said what he had said before; that he was ready and eager for the work; and preliminaries were soon settled. Griffith again cautioned him to preserve silence, and, after some further conversation, the agent was dismissed.

Nothing had been said about the Buried Treasure; whether Beck suspected anything was not certain.

Griffith was in high spirits. He believed that the treasure would soon be his; and if he secured it he proposed to abduct Nell Stebbins and flee to British soil. If he failed, no harm would be done by the attempt, and he could remain at the Bend and carry on his existing schemes. As he was becoming alarmed, he hoped, however, that he would not need to stay.

He dismissed Beck at the door with the parting direction:

"Take care not to excite suspicion, and come to my house to-morrow night at half-past nine o'clock."

CHAPTER XXVII.

AT GRIFFITH'S HOUSE.

It was a striking and ominous coincidence that the time selected for the coming of Beck to Griffith's house varied but a few minutes from that when Nell intended to gain entrance there.

If Mary had known the other plans that were at work, she would have been more than ever troubled at thought of Nell's rash designs.

Griffith went home in good spirits. He felt that he was standing on dangerous ground at Black Rock Bend, and the crash which would ruin him might come at any moment; but if he could find the Buried Treasure, he would show his enemies a clean pair of heels, vulgarly speaking, and become a dweller in the British Dominions, with Nell as his companion. Her consent was something he knew he could not get, and he did not intend to trouble himself about it.

During the next day he secretly made preparations for the trip with Beck. He had already conveyed two spades and two picks to a thicket in the wood. He now secured three horses, and did whatever else seemed advisable. It was an anxious day, for the fascination of the Buried Treasure was upon him, and his future would soon be given a great impetus in one direction or another.

When the store was closed for the night, he told Nat Westcott that he was called away on business, and should be gone at least one day and perhaps more. He could not tell as to that, but Nat was to manage business while he was gone.

Then Mr. Griffith took his way homeward.

In the mean while, Nell Stebbins had been as carefully making preparations for her undertaking, though what she had to do was simple enough. The main thing was to put her revolver—a beautiful, but deadly, little weapon given her two years before by her father—in good order. She cleaned it carefully, polished the nickel-plating until it shone in a dazzling way, and put fresh cartridges in the chambers.

At ten minutes to nine she said good-night to Mary and started for Griffith's.

The little woman's heart was brave. Possibly she underrated the danger, but she knew that it was no pleasure undertaking, and no joking matter; it was an earnest attempt to foil a desperate man in his efforts to commit crime; and if she was detected, it might go hard with her.

These ominous facts she clearly realized, she believed.

She went quickly and quietly to Griffith's house, and, according to the arrangement with Dorcas Strong, knocked at the rear door. It was promptly opened by the woman.

Nell had no respect for her ally. She believed Dorcas to be unscrupulous, but money had been used to make her mind bend in the right channel, and it was to be hoped that she would be faithful. Certainly, she now showed due interest.

"Is everything favorable, Dorcas?" Nell asked.

"I reckon so. I ain't seen anything contrary."

"Mr. Griffith isn't home yet?"

"No; but he may come any time. My advice is that you git inter your hidin'-place right off, an' then thar can't be no mistake. Besides, I'm ready ter go ter bed."

"That is right, and we will finish our arrangements at once. Has Marion retired?"

"Yes."

"Is she asleep?"

"I reckon not."

"Be careful not to let her suspect that I am here."

"She won't git no news from me."

"Thank you; and now, to cover."

There were four rooms on the lower floor of the house, of which two only were of any material size. These were, first, a combined dining and sitting-room, and, secondly, the family kitchen. From the latter opened a closet, and to this place Nell at once went. If Dorcas retired before her master came home, she always left a lighted lamp on the kitchen table. In this room, too, was kept a supply of water, and Nell reasoned that if Steele mixed any medicine at night it would be done there. The water was there, and the amber-hued cordial required a quantity of water, while he would be free from observation unless intentionally watched.

After some immaterial conversation, Dorcas set the lamp upon the table and ascended to the upper floor.

Nell was left alone.

For a moment the girl's heart fluttered perceptibly, but she soon recovered composure. The closet was large enough for her use, and she could see the whole kitchen by keeping the door ajar the least particle. She was upon the scene of action, and had now only to await Griffith's arrival. It was not at all likely that he would

look in the closet, and her watch, successful or otherwise, would doubtless be limited to a few minutes.

It was her intention, in case of failure, to try again, but that was something to be settled later.

Suddenly she heard the front door open; the critical moment was near at hand.

She closed the closet-door as far as she could and still have a chance to watch the marked man. There was a pause, and then Griffith came in with quick steps. He glanced carelessly around the room, and then took the lamp and retreated without delay. Nell heard him ascending the stairs. Thus far there had been no danger to her, and her courage increased considerably. The next question was, would Griffith fulfill her programme?

There was a long delay, so long that her faith was shaken. At first she heard Griffith moving about up-stairs, but these sounds soon died away. Utter silence ensued, and nearly half an hour passed. Had he retired for the night? Was her watch to prove unavailing?

She did not allow herself to be betrayed into any indiscretion, and it was well that she did not. There was more for her to see, and the beginning of the scene came abruptly when it did come.

A bar of light shot into the kitchen, and Griffith appeared; he had opened the kitchen door without warning, and entered with his lamp. The change from darkness to light was almost startling to Nell, and the abruptness of his movements led her to fear, at first, that she had been discovered, or betrayed by Dorcas.

He carefully closed the door and set the lamp on the table once more. Then it was that the girl-spy saw that which gave her fresh hope; he held a bottle in his hand.

With intense interest she watched what followed.

Griffith held up the bottle and looked at it with a strange expression on his face. It was half-filled with colorless liquid. Then he took from a niche near the water a small vial. This was a legitimate medicine which, rightly or not, he claimed should be kept in a cool place. Possibly it was only an artifice to enable him to work secretly.

He poured a quantity of the contents of the vial into the large bottle, whereupon the mixture assumed an amber color. Then he added a quantity of water. After that his movements grew stealthy and suspicious. He went to the door which led to the next room and listened. The result seemed to satisfy him, for a dark smile crossed his face, and he drew from his pocket a tightly-tied package of small size.

Nell almost held her breath with eagerness.

Deliberately he laid the package on the table and unfolded it. It was more paper than anything else, but Nell, looking with painful interest, saw that a small quantity of grayish powder was contained inside.

Griffith contemplated it with parted lips, and his expression was wolfish.

"I am tempted to make the dose a big one, and end all at one stroke!" he muttered, "but there may be some miscarriage of my present plans. Patience! patience! The safe way is always the best, and Maynard said that a small quantity would leave no trace. Marion is sad because I am going away, and I will leave this little gift as a farewell memento. Death, itself, could not be kinder, and I am the agent of death!"

He had carefully measured out the proper quantity of powder, and now dropped it into the medicine.

"I've always heard it said that that there was death in the bottle," he added, with ghastly humor, "and I think the temperance cranks would be convinced if they took that."

He replaced the cork, tied up what was left of the gray powder and put it away in his pocket, and then assumed a lighter air.

"All goes well," he said, cheerfully, "and I think that I see my star in the ascendant. All that I need to complete my happiness is the divine Nell!"

Smiling at his thoughts he turned, walked straight toward the closet door and laid his hand upon the handle. Fate often plays queer pranks. Steele Griffith had not opened that door before in a month, but some perverse demon now gave him an idea that he wanted something which he knew was in the little receptacle for odds and ends.

Nell shrunk back and clung to the door. She had seen her worst fears realized, and the terrible truth had fallen upon her with unexpected force. She had lost much of her former courage—and then came this personal danger.

She clung to the door, but every chance was against her. Her hold was poorer than Griffith's; her strength far less than his. He gave an impatient jerk and the door flew open.

The two—the would-be murderer and the witness of his crime—stood face to face.

It was a startling surprise.

Steele Griffith's face grew pale as death, his eyes seemed to start from their sockets, and he staggered back as though he had literally received a sharp blow. Surprise, terror and dismay were depicted on his face, and all his old

coolness was for the time gone. He did not fail to realize what that discovery portended, and he saw phantoms of doom floating in his reeling mind.

His terror did more than anything else to reassure Nell. The color rushed back to her own pale face, and her courage returned with it. Extending one hand dramatically, she pointed to him with the finger of fate.

"Murderer!" she exclaimed, in a thrilling voice.

He could only stare at her.

"You are found out, at last!" she continued, in a voice which seemed incapable of birth in her slender frame. "The mask of righteousness has fallen from your face and revealed your black heart. Thank Heaven! your day of power is past!"

With a quick movement she seized the bottle of drugged medicine and dashed it to fragments on the floor. Her eyes gleamed with a wild light, yet with clear, grand and impressive power.

The crash aroused Griffith as from a nightmare. With one rush his energies came back, and he sprang toward her with hands outstretched.

"You devil!" he hissed, "you shall never tell this story elsewhere!"

Furiously gleamed his eyes, but the Pathfinder's daughter was true to her ancestry. In a moment more her deadly little revolver was bearing full upon the man's heart, and held as unwaveringly as fate.

"Stop!" she exclaimed, in a clear voice. "Keep off, or I will fire!"

Once more he recoiled. He was not mad enough to defy that potent weapon, with the brave girl to hold it. He read her determination; her grand courage; her steadiness of nerve; and he knew that nothing but a rare chance could save him if he persisted in his purpose. He stopped and stood looking at her in terror.

"You are mad, mad!" he muttered.

"Better for you if I were!" she retorted.

"You have threatened—"

His husky voice died away.

"To expose you," she added. "Yes, and I will do it. I have suspected you, watched you, detected you. Now justice shall be done."

"Have mercy!" he implored. "Give me one-quarter of the love I feel for you—"

"Villain, be silent!" she cried, her eyes flashing. "Don't dare to speak further to me. I am going now, and I warn you not to molest me. If you do, I will shoot you as I would a wolf!"

She took a backward step toward the door, but Steele's eyes suddenly glittered and he seemed to look beyond Nell.

"Seize her!" he exclaimed.

Nell turned quickly, but too late. Strong arms were thrown around her, and she saw the face of Beck, the hunter, close to her own. She was doubly beset. Desperately she struggled, but she was helpless in that stronghold. Her revolver was wrested away, and she was a prisoner.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

MOSES.

DARKER grew the shades in the wood, and Laramie Luke knew that daylight would soon leave him. After that, the chances that Yank and Powderfoot would rescue him were very few, and if Pride Oliver's statement about the grizzlies was true, the prisoner's fate was sealed.

The approach of danger incited him to fresh efforts, the rope which held him to the tree was not to be broken. He did, however, accomplish one result. He succeeded in ejecting the gag from his mouth. This gave him a last chance, he believed, and he made an attempt to shout. The sound might be heard by his friends.

Even then he was baffled. His jaws, cramped by having so long been set apart by the gag, refused to move, and his voice was not much better; he made only a faint, husky sound not to be heard a hundred feet away.

"I'll wait a few moments, and they may resume their normal condition," he thought.

He waited, but, suddenly, a new sound became audible. It was the patter of light feet, unquestionably those of an animal of some sort. For the first time Luke felt something like real fear. The steps were too quick for those of a grizzly—was it a prowling panther?

Nearer and nearer came the patter. Luke set his teeth tightly; if death was at hand he was determined to meet it bravely. Then the animal darted into view, and the blood rushed hotly to the young man's face.

The animal was Yank's dog, Moses.

A more complete reaction of feeling it would be hard to imagine, and Luke's eyes brightened with hope. Moses was coming at a trot, his nose close to the ground, and evidently following the young man's trail, and his homely form seemed suddenly to assume rare grace in Luke's eyes.

"Moses! Moses!" he exclaimed, joyfully.

The dog had already seen him, and no longer paid attention to the trail. He rushed forward and, rearing, placed two big paws on the bound man's breast and thrust his nose affectionately into Luke's ribs.

"Good dog! Good Moses!" the hunter added, whereupon Moses dropped upon all four feet and indulged in a frisky dance.

"Where is your master?" Luke continued, as he looked in vain for Yank or Powderfoot.

Moses was not capable of answering the question, and his frisky mood suddenly vanished. He reared again, and again poked his nose forcibly into Luke's side, but his manner had grown subdued and serious.

"He realizes that there is something wrong with me," continued Luke, finding a pleasure in talking aloud. "There is something in the honest animal's cranium—a mind, or what you will; names don't signify—that speaks clearly. If Moses had hands, I should not long be tied up here. No sign of Yank or the Pathfinder. The dog has evidently followed my trail alone, and on his own responsibility, and though I have company, freedom is still denied me."

He ceased speaking, and watched Moses curiously. The animal resumed a natural position and looked straight at Luke. If there was not pathos, and a full realization of trouble, in that gaze, the young man was greatly at fault. "Profound ideas were working in the dog-mind, and Moses whined in a melancholy way."

"Noble Moses!" added the prisoner, "your heart is with me, but again comes the lamentable lack of hands. Now, if I had any means of writing a note, I'll wager something you would carry it straight to Yank, but if I could write a note I could release myself. Both are out of the question. No doubt I can send you back to your master, but would you bring Yank to me? I really believe you would, but it is a risk, and I hate to part with my only friend."

The dog was uneasy. He elevated his head and drew air freely into his nostrils. No good seemed to come of it. He looked at Luke, hesitated, moved off a few steps with his nose close to the ground, hesitated once more, and then returned to the bound man. His uneasiness grew more marked; he sniffed at Luke's knees; he again reared up and punched him with his nose.

"Useless!" commented the hunter. "Your sympathy is evident, but you are helpless."

Moses thrust his nose against the rope and gave it a sharp, impatient upward movement; he caught at it with his teeth and tore a strand apart. A sound, half-growl and half-whine, passed his lips, and he again bit at it viciously.

Sudden hope flashed upon the prisoner. He saw clearly that Moses had an idea which had not before occurred to his—the human—mind.

"Good Moses!" he exclaimed. "Go on! go on!"

Moses responded with a growl and attacked the rope more earnestly. His teeth were long, strong and sharp, and he knew how to use them. He went at the work as though the rope had been a living foe; vicious, indeed, was his manner, and he worked with persistence which could not but bear fruit.

Luke watched him closely, and his spirits arose still higher as he saw strand after strand give way. There was no lull in the work, and those sharp teeth cut a road through the rope steadily. The result no longer seemed in doubt.

Everything else was forgotten in the excitement of the moment, and Pride Oliver would have lamented his lack of wisdom could he have known what was transpiring.

Bravely the dog tore at the rope, and Luke encouraged him with equal interest and enthusiasm; then the last strand snapped apart and the work was done. Laramie Luke made a muscular effort, and the rope fell away like a decapitated serpent relaxing its hold.

The hunter stooped forward, once more a free man, and, yielding to an irresistible impulse, caught Moses in his arms as though he had been a human being. One hug, a few words of encouragement, and then Luke arose, while the dog indulged a frisky demonstration in strong contrast to his late serious demeanor.

"Now for other work!" the young man exclaimed. "There is not a moment to lose, Moses. Back to the hut, good friend—back to the hut!"

He turned his face toward Yank's camp, and then suddenly paused. The outlaws had robbed him of his weapons, but he had not seen his rifle carried away. Impressed with the idea that it might be in Oliver's late quarters, he went to the building, and after a long search, found it hidden under a pile of boughs. Ammunition he could not find, but he took the rifle and started for the treasure-seekers' camp with Moses at his heels.

When he reached the hut he found Yank and Powderfoot preparing to leave.

"Land o' Goshen!" the former exclaimed, "hyar's the boy, hisself. We thought some harm had come ter you—we did, by burley!—an' we was jest goin' out ter sarch fur ye. Now I look at yer cl se, I dubno but you hev b'en in some egregious tribulation."

"Nevermiss, I have."

"You don't say so!"

"It is true."

"Outlaws?"

"Yes."

Yank struck his broad hand forcibly against his rifle.

"I feared it, an' we ought ter looked ye up afore, but we was all bound up in diggin' fur gold we didn't find. So you've seen the mean skunks, an' had a heap o' distress? I'm sorry, by burley! How'd ye get out on't?"

Luke pointed to the dog.

"I owe all to him."

"Ter Moses?"

"Yes. Bound to a tree, I was perfectly helpless; but your faithful dumb friend came to my aid. We are not allowed to credit a dog with a mind—with reasoning powers—so we will say that his instinct told him what to do. He gnawed my bonds apart with his keen teeth, and set me free."

The breech of Yank's rifle came down upon the hard ground with a thump. He advanced his face and looked sharply at Laramie Luke.

"Moses did that?"

"Yes."

"Then, by burley, Moses an' I are partners right along stiddy arter this. Dog, I'm proud on ye; I be, sure's you're alive. I consait you are capable o' holdin' up the Yellowbird pedigree with dignity an' muskle. By gracious, thar is more ter a dog than most folks allow, though they're o' all sorts. A fu'st-class dog is about as skeerce as a fu'st-class man. I've see'd all sorts o' canine dogs, myself. Once had a big specimen o' the genius that got some repitition along o' a sarcumstance he an' I figgered in; an' when we got ter a town we was made the ob-jicks o' feastin' an' adlugation. A famous belle o' the town sent fur me, an' I visited her in her apartment—her snooze-war, I b'lieve she called it."

"Boudoir," suggested Luke.

"I consait that *was* the word, now I hear it ag'in. Wal, thar sot the belle, lookin' like a dry-goods store on a wax-figger; an' as the Yellowbirds are all exceptable ter female charms, I acted as polite an' pooty as I could."

"I've heerd o' the explite o' yer noble dog, sir," says she.

"Much obleeged," sez I.

"Do ye like dogs?" sez she.

"I adore 'em," sez I.

"I am very glad ter hear it," sez she, "fur I hev a dog, an' he is the cutest, darlin'est dog you ever seen. I'll have my maid bring him in," sez she.

"The dog was brung, an' I'll be condemned ef he was bigger'n my two fists; an' most on him was shaggy hair, at that; an' he sca'ce had any eyes at that. The belle kissed him six times right on the nose, an' then spanked him down inter my lap."

"Now ain't he a darlin'?" sez she.

"I consait so," sez I lookin' at the hijus little wretch in absolute agony o' mind.

"Does he resemble *your* dog?" sez she.

"Thar's one p'int o' resemblance," sez I.

"What's that?" sez she.

"He's got four feet an' a tail," sez I, "though I must say his caudal appendix is egregiously 'breviated.'"

"You rude man!" sez she, hittin' me a clip with her fan, playful-like. "Pet my Apollo," sez she.

"I sorter run my hands over the little insex fur he was so atrocious homely I pitied him, an' the belle smiled in a pooty way that pleased me."

"He's the sweetest darlin', an' so 'fectionate," sez she.

"Jest then he give a snarl, an' sunk his teeth inter my thumb ontill the molars an' in-scissors met in the bone."

"Playful as a kitten, ain't he?" sez she.

"Jes' about," sez I, wishin the family pedigree 'lowed the Yellowbird's ter swear; "but I don't want the critter ter mistake me fur a mouse," sez I. "I wa'n't made ter be devoured, an' it's plain he's an egregious cannibawl."

"Jest then he sot his teeth in my thumb ag'in, an' I give a yell an' jumped so quick that I knocked over my chair an' fell on the floor, an', by burley, I some way come down kerflop on that dog. Land o' Goshen! you orter heerd the rumpus that follered! The dog yelped an' so did the gal; an' the female maid, she screeched fire; an' I bolted out o' the house with the three on 'em hot arter me. You see, they blamed me fur the mishap ter the egregious little canine dog. I got away, but I didn't stay in that town an hour longer; I got away, fast as I could leg it."

"Sence then, I sorter make a distinction 'mongst dogs, an' a'prove on 'em only when they range in size from a lion down ter a cat. Anythin' smaller may do for a lady's snooze-war—boudoir, I mean—but not fur me. I'm glad ter hear the reports, about Moses, though, an' consait I hev found a follerer wuth havin'."

Laramie Luke was glad that Yank was in a talkative mood. He dreaded to tell Powderfoot the news, and, as nothing could be done until morning; he was now anxious to defer the unpleasant tidings he had before been so eager to tell.

It had to be done, however, and he went ahead as bravely as he could, looking pitifully at the Pathfinder.

"There is one thing more for me to explain," he said.

"Go on, lad," Yank answered.

"The outlaws had a prisoner."

His manner caused Yank to look at him sharply.

"Anybody we know?" the mountaineer demanded.

"Unfortunately, yes."

"Some man from Black Rock Bend?"

"I did not say it was a man."

Yank started and shot a questioning glance at Powderfoot. The septuagenarian's face too, had assumed an anxious expression. He spoke abruptly:

"Young man, do you mean ter say it was a woman?"

"Yes."

"A woman pris'ner o' the outlaws, an' from the Bend?"

"Unfortunately, yes."

The Pathfinder strode forward and grasped Luke's arm with almost crushing force.

"Her name!" he exclaimed, in a husky voice.

"Don't keep me in suspense. Her name! I say!"

"Powderfoot, be prepared for the worst!"

The old borderer staggered back, throwing his hands up to his head.

"Nell!—my Nell!" he groaned, shaking like a leaf.

"Bear up!" Luke urged. "Rest assured, we will rescue her. I—every one—will help you."

"Lad, is this rec'y so?" Yank soberly asked.

"It is only too true. Nell is a prisoner."

"Rescue her!" echoed Nevermiss, striking his rifle as though to crush a human foe. "You're right, we'll do it—we'll do it ef ev'ry atrocious outlaw in the land stands in the way. We'll crush 'em as Samson Yellowbird did the Philistines an' scribes, when he pulled down their meet-in'-house. Pathfinder, take courage! We're with ye, an' we'll make a tremenjous triberlation among the enemy—we will, by hurley!"

Powderfoot suddenly aroused, took a forward step and reached out vaguely with his hands, like a blind man.

"My rifle!" he gasped, hoarsely. "Whar is it?—I'm sorter blind jest now. Give me my rifle!"

CHAPTER XXIX.

YANK HEARS NEWS.

THE Pathfinder's emotion was almost uncontrollable, and his brouzed face had assumed a grayish pallor alarming to see. Strong man that he had been, he was now too far advanced in years to bear such a blow easily. Nell was the pride of his life, and the one treasure of his heart, and anything that threatened her was worse than a personal calamity to himself.

It was evident that he was for the time in no condition to even think for himself, and Yank and Luke each took an arm and tried to calm him. He resisted and declared that he was going out at once to punish Nell's foes, but his companions pointed out the futility of such a step.

The only way was to trail the abductors, and this could not be done until morning.

Their persuasions were at length successful, and the Pathfinder was prevailed upon to sit down. For once, Yank indulged in the pastime of boasting of his own prowess.

"You know me, Powderfoot," he said; "an' you know no trail is too much fur me. When I set out ter beat any mean insex I do it, an' I'll hev Nell back safe ef the newrolgy splinters ev'ry bone in my system inter toothpicks. I say it, an' whar Yank Yellowbird says he always does."

Then the mountaineer shielded his mouth with his hand and, shaking his head, added in an aside to Luke:

"I hope I'll be forgive fur sech outrageous claims. It don't look wal fur a weak vessel like me ter boast, an' it's an egregious blot onter the Yellowbird pedigree; but we've got ter comfort the Pathfinder ef we wrench the truth like hurley!"

Turning again to the aged borderer, he shook his index finger gravely to emphasize his remarks, and continued:

"I've fooled them insex afore, old frien', an' I tell ye they don't amount ter a row o' taller candles in a blizzard. We'll go out ter-morrer an' thrash the hull caboodle on 'em, an' git Nell back; an' then we'll git the Buried Treasure an' fill her pockets up full with it. Land o' Goshen! won't she be as tickled as we was with our fu'st boots, Pathfinder?"

Yank's good humor, though forced, was encouraging, and the old strong will reasserted itself with Powderfoot. Deep as was the blow, he was not the man to be crushed by misfortune, and when the tide turned, he rallied quickly.

An earnest consultation took place after Laramie Luke had told his story in full.

No one understood how Nell happened to be in the hands of the outlaws, but it was surmised that Pride Oliver, who was a young man and not given to scruples, had taken a fancy to her, and had had her abducted.

The most important question was, how were they to rescue her?

Luke had learned from the outlaws' talk that they had practically deserted from Boxshot's band, and intended to make the revolt against

their leader radical and emphatic. It seemed that the outlaw headquarters was known as "The Refuge," and that Pride Oliver and his party intended to proceed there, start a mutiny against Boxshot, seize "The Refuge," and, probably, reorganize with Oliver at the head of the band.

Yank dryly observed that the might find that grim Link Boxshot would have something to say about that, but that was a matter for the outlaws to settle among themselves; the work of the treasure-hunters was to rescue Nell, and they were resolved to do it if such a thing was possible.

As for the way, there was but one—to follow the trail to wherever it led.

The trio retired early. It was not thought that danger need be apprehended, and the result justified their views; the night passed quietly.

In the morning they secreted their picks and spades, and rode over to Oliver's temporary home. They found the trail, and it proved easy to follow at the start. Later a rather ingenious attempt had been made to baffle pursuit, but Yank was not long in overcoming the difficulties.

After that the trail led away toward the east in a line nearly direct, and as there were five horses in the party, a broad trail had been left which could be followed at fair speed.

Night found them with their journey unfinished though the fact that no place had been discovered where Oliver and his party camped the previous night, led them to believe they were near the end. Probably the abductors, anxious to reach "The Refuge," and being well acquainted with the way, had pushed on after darkness fell, in order to put their schemes into effect.

Good evidence was found, shortly before night, that Nell was still with the party; a dainty handkerchief was found by the trail which not only bore her initials, but was readily recognized by the Pathfinder.

The old borderer had recovered his usual resolution, and was eager to meet the abductors in battle.

The pursuers did not venture to use their rifles at this stage of affairs, but made supper on food already in their possession. The meal finished, Powderfoot lighted his pipe and began to smoke quietly. His philosophical self-control was as pleasing to the younger men as his endurance was remarkable, but his years sat very lightly upon him.

"I have an idee," said Yank, breaking a short silence, "that I kin go scoutin' with good results."

"Do you really think we are near the outlaws' lair?" asked Laramie Luke.

"That's what I want ter diskiver."

"The idee is good," agreed Powderfoot.

"We don't want ter blunder inter them ter-morrer, an' I kin soon l'arn ef the way is clear a mile ahead on us."

"Don't try ter do too much alone."

"Sartain not. I consait that the den o' the insex will be wal guarded, an' I might not be able ter git at 'em. Thar's more than one way ter do it, though, an' we will yit give the enemy a heap o' trouble. We ain't many in number, but give me a few good men rather than an army o' poor ones. I uster hev a comrade who was a Modoc Injun; a young feller named Trail-Lifter; an' we hev done some del'kit work 'thout other help. He was about as good as they make 'em, an' the only Injun I ever cared ter mix with, but his blood was too wild fur my monotonous life; he j'ined the Sioux, an' he's with 'em yet."

The mountaineer shouldered his rifle.

"I'm goin', now," he added. "I needn't caution ye ter be careful hyar, fur I consait ye know the need on't. They may be prowlin' hyar now."

He started, and Moses pushed himself suggestively into view. After the dog's last exploit he occupied a position where Yank could refuse him nothing; the word was given, and the animal followed at his heels. They soon ceased to be heard.

The night was clear, with an abundance of stars overhead, and when Yank had taken his bearings he pushed forward steadily in a direct line. Danger lurked by the way, not only from the outlaws but from the beasts of the forest but this was nothing to him. Danger had been his almost constant companion for thirty years, and it had come to be a part of his daily life. In a certain way he was always on the watch for it, but it gave him no uneasiness.

As he went on he paused at times, but heard nothing suspicious. His own movements were scarcely louder than the dog's light footfalls.

In this way a mile was soon put between him and the place where he had left his friends.

The wisdom of his own precautions was finally shown. He was moving quietly forward when a new sound reached his trained hearing. He paused and listened. The unmistakable murmur of human voices was audible. Then his eyes lighted up, and he became the veteran woodsman to the life. Straight forward he went, but with slow and stealthy movements that scarcely rustled a leaf.

Whoever were talking were stationary, and the mountaineer soon succeeded in getting a position where he could overhear their words. He noticed, too, that a cliff was just beyond them; a long, dark line of rock stretched away on either hand, but with a break just where the men stood. It was like a vast gateway to a Titanic wall, and Yank at once suspected that they were guarding the passage.

He listened attentively.

"Say whar ye will, Pratt, this thing is goin' ter work ag'in' us. You know the old sayin', how if folks are united they stand, an' if divided, they fall."

"I don't want ter stand with Link Boxshot," was the reply.

"Ain't he b'en a bold, long-headed, lucky leader?"

"Ain't he b'en a tyrant?" Pratt retorted.

"He's b'en a strick disciplinarian."

"I should say so. How many of his own men has he shot down like dogs?"

"They were mutineers, an' he did right, I say."

"Look hyar, Dave Lake, you don't want ter go on that way. Pride Oliver rules the Refuge now, an' ef he hears o' your way o' talkin', he may give ye a touch o' the discipline you admire so much in Boxshot. When you serve a new master, don't blow too loud fur the old."

"This is 'only private talk between me an' you," somewhat hastily explained Lake.

"I ain't sure but I ought ter tell Oliver."

"Would ye do that?" threateningly demanded Lake.

"It don't look wal fur you ter talk so. Thar has b'en a revolt at the Refuge, an' we've helped put Pride Oliver in Boxshot's place, but, pretty soon, Boxshot will be howlin' around hyar, an' then thar is goin' ter be a fight. He will do his level best ter storm the Refuge, an' it will be a hard fight. Now, I've resked my neck on the revolt, an' cast my lot with Oliver, an' I speak fur the whole o' the new band when I say that we don't want any traitors inside the Refuge."

"I ain't a traitor!" Lake declared.

"I don't say you be, but your talk is strange."

"Don't you fear fur me, Pratt. I j'ined Oliver with my eyes wide open, an' I'm goin' ter stick by him. A good word fur Boxshot won't do no harm, will it, as long as I'm true ter the new order o' things?"

"It may do a heap o' harm. Fur my part, I say, speak no good o' Link Boxshot until we have him whipped so bad that he ain't dangerous. Let Oliver, or Beck, or even Arnok, hear you praise the old man, an' you might get a lead pill. You don't ketch me comin' the pathetic. We have a new king, so ter speak, an' he will naturally be suspicious. Now, I like Oliver, an' think he will make a good captain. Thar is only one thing I don't like."

"What's that?"

"I don't a'prove o' the gal Oliver has hyar."

"She's as pooty as a rose."

"Just so, Dave Lake, an' that's whar the trouble will come in. Boxshot never allowed any pretty women around; he knowed they would kick up more rows in a week than a regiment o' grizzlies. A pretty woman is the devil's best worker, I say; an' I'm a bit worried about this gal. Who knows whar rows will come of it? Then, ag'in, she's got the pluck o' a wildcat, an' comes right of fightin' stock; it stan's ter reason that a darter o' old Powderfoot is as full o' fight as a nut is o' meat."

Yank nodded his head quietly. He had secured the best of proof that Nell was in the outlaws' lair—the next thing was to get her away. He judged from what the men said that she had thus far been well treated, and if her friends could strike in time there might, in the end, be only an unpleasant memory to recall this episode in her life.

But how was she to be rescued?

The long line of cliff before the mountaineer did not look promising. Seen from his position it looked to be unscalable, and as the followers of Pride Oliver were unquestionably taking every precaution to guard against Boxshot, it would be no easy matter to enter the Refuge.

Suddenly new and suspicious sounds fell upon Yank's ears, and the guards were not long in noticing the same thing.

"Hark!" exclaimed Pratt. "What's that?"

Sure enough; there was a disturbance of some sort in the woods, and the sound grew nearer. Its meaning flashed upon Yank long before the guards gained the idea.

"By the fiends!" cried Pratt, "I believe Boxshot an' his men is comin'. That racket is made by fast-goin' hosses, or I'm no judge. Thar ain't no doubt, an' we'll pass the signal!"

Raising his hands to his lips he sounded a shrill, long-drawn whistle. It was answered by some one a few rods to the rear, and a fainter repetition was heard further on. Then, with headlong haste, the night-riders came sweeping toward the rocky entrance to the Refuge.

CHAPTER XXX.

MISSING NELL.

OUR best intentions often go for nothing.

When Nell went on her hazardous visit to Griffith's house Mary Sherwin retired, according to the rule of the Mission Annex, at nine

o'clock. Mr. Brandreth was, in one particular as finically fastidious as the head of a college for females—all lights had to be extinguished at nine o'clock.

Mary retired, but with the firm intention of remaining awake until Nell returned. Mary, however, was young, and the air of the wilderness town was particularly adapted to slumber. She unintentionally fell asleep, and, lulled by the equally drowsy air, as it were, failed to fully awake until morning.

Day had dawned when she opened her eyes. She awoke refreshed, with an active mind. She thought of Nell, and turned her head. Nell was not present, and her pillow had not that night been pressed by her fair head.

Alarm seized upon Mary. Nell had distinctly stated that she should return in two hours, at the outside; perhaps in one hour, or even in half that time. The night had passed, and there was no sign of her. What did it mean? Mary feared the worst. Her own experience with Steele Griffith had been that she believed him capable of any dark deed. Had Nell detected him in the commission of one crime only to be the victim of another?

Hurriedly arising, the girl looked through the window. The first rays of the morning sun fell upon her face. They rested caressingly upon the tree-top; south of the river, and on the roof of the Mission, and on the bold, frowning face of Black Rock. It was a peaceful scene; too peaceful by far. If the bush of Nature had been disturbed by the appearance of Nell, Mary would have been happy.

But Nell was invisible.

The moments that followed were painful in the extreme. Mary tried to convince herself that, for some reason, Nell had openly stayed with Mrs. Griffith through the night, but the attempt was a failure. Dark forebodings filled her mind.

It was not long to the hour for assembling in the Annex dining-room, and Mary was eager to be there. After all, she might find Nell awaiting her. This hope was destroyed when she descended; her friend was not there.

Mr. Brandreth looked at the vacant chair as they sat down.

"Where is Miss Stebbins?" he asked.

Mary was bound by a promise to Nell, and she dared not say too much; neither would she deny all knowledge of Nell's movements.

"She went to Mr. Griffith's last night, sir."

"Is Mrs. Griffith worse?"

"Not to my knowledge."

Brandreth said no more. He thought that Nell should have sent word if she was not to be present at breakfast, but the possibility that she was doing Samaritan work kept him from making comments. The breakfast—a most miserable meal to Mary—was dispatched without any change in the situation. When it was over the superintendent turned to one of his white pupils.

"Go to Mr. Griffith's," he directed, "and inquire for Miss Stebbins. Also, ask whether Mrs. Griffith is worse?"

The boy hastened away. Brandreth awaited his return with composure, for he suspected nothing wrong, while Mary was in a condition of anxiety hard to endure. The messenger was not gone over ten minutes; he returned, and made his report in these words:

"Mrs. Griffith is as well as usual, and Miss Stebbins has not been at the house since yesterday noon."

Brandreth glanced at Mary. The startled expression on her face told him plainer than words that she had been sincere in making her statement.

"Whom did you see?" the missionary asked.

"All of them, sir."

"Both Mr. and Mrs. Griffith?"

"Yes; and Dorcas Strong."

"And all said that Miss Stebbins had not been there?"

"Yes, sir."

Brandreth turned to Mary.

"How do you account for this, Miss Stebbins?"

"Indeed, sir, I don't know," faltered the girl.

"Miss Stebbins left you, saying that she was going to Griffith's at—what hour?"

"A little before nine."

"My boy, go to the cabin of Powderfoot, and see if the young lady is there."

The boy went, but soon returned to report that no one was in the Pathfinder's cabin. In the meanwhile, Mr. Brandreth had questioned Mary further. She remembered her promise to Nell, and would not tell the secret of the girl's visit. She resorted to evasion, but it was so well done that the superintendent ascribed all to her fears, and did not suspect that she was keeping back an important secret. The last report of the boy thoroughly aroused Brandreth, however, and the result was a general search and inquiry.

As Black Rock Bend was a small place, it was soon known that Nell was not inside the village.

Thoroughly alarmed, Brandreth again questioned Mary. Three men had dropped in and heard what was said. One of these men was Kansas Kitten. He took no part in the con-

versation, and seemed to listen only with careless curiosity. Nothing was learned by the latest questions. Mary remembered Nell's emphatic assertion that her secret must be preserved, and the hope that she might soon appear, faint as it was, chained Mary's tongue.

Without descending to absolute falsehood, she left the impression in Brandreth's mind that Nell had intended only an ordinary visit.

This conversation finished, the missionary himself started for Griffith's. Then it was that Kansas Kitten quietly moved to Mary's side.

"Young woman," he said, in a matter-of-fact voice, "what be you keepin' back?"

Mary could not avoid a start.

"What do you mean?" she uneasily asked.

"You haven't tol' the parson all the facts. Mebbe my eyes are keener than his; I dunno, but I do know you ain't told all you know. Now, o' course, you mean wal, but you may be doin' great harm."

Mary's color came and went fitfully.

"Why are you interested?" she asked.

"I wouldn't willin'ly see a young gal left ter the marcy o' human wolves; I'm afeerd the marcy would be found wantin'."

"You assume a good deal, sir."

"I kin read you like a book. Don't be angry, gal, fur I mean no harm. I'll bet my last dollar you are as fine as silk, an' true-blue at heart, an' Nell's frien'. But one may be too true. I'm a dogmatic feline, but I kin see that. Ain't you afeerd yer devotion ter Nell may do harm?"

The Kitten's voice had grown serious and warning, while his manner was kind and persuasive. Mary felt inclined to confide in him, but she looked at his coarse, red face; his squat figure and uncared-for hair and beard; and felt that when she did tell her story, Brandreth, not this vagabondish-looking stranger, was properly the one to hear it.

"You are talking nonsense, sir!" she coldly replied, and turned away and went to another part of the room.

Kansas Kitten shrugged his shoulders and left the Annex. Brandreth soon returned. He had seen all the inmates of Griffith's house, and they had plainly stated that Nell had not been there. At noon, the previous day, she had dropped in for a few minutes; had conversed lightly and pleasantly with Marion; and had said nothing about calling in the evening. Marion, Griffith and Dorcas alike declared that she had not been there during the evening.

The missionary now did some close thinking. Reasoning from the basis of the information he possessed, he came to the conclusion that Nell had deliberately deceived them all, including Mary. Her motive might be a worthy one, and might not, but, in any case, he decided to wait until after noon before taking further steps. If she did not then return, something must be done.

And he directed that the Mission school be conducted as usual, Mrs. Brandreth acting as substitute for the missing girl.

When noon came Nell had not appeared, and there was still further delay. At four o'clock the matter was still in doubt. By that time, too, many persons were beginning to blame the missionary for his apathy, and Mary had arrived at the conclusion that even loyalty to her friend would not allow her to remain silent any longer; she determined to tell the whole story.

There was one person who was not apathetic during the day. This was Kansas Kitten. Sympathy, or the natural promptings of his nature, or the force of habit, had caused him to feel deep interest in the case. He had done all he could to clear up the mystery, having talked with nearly every one in the village; and this was the result of his research: He believed that Mary could explain far more than she had told, and could put the key to the mystery in their hands. He had noticed, too, during the forenoon, that Steele Griffith was nervous and uneasy. At noon the man disappeared.

At about the time Mary was deciding to reveal all, the Kitten gained a clew, and, as will shortly be seen, it was a most important one.

When Mary left the Mission, to go to the Annex, she was somewhat startled to see Kansas Kitten suddenly appear at her side.

"My dear young lady," he abruptly said, "haven't you about made up yer mind ter speak right out, plain?"

The man and his persistence irritated Mary.

"I have nothing to say—to you," she defiantly replied.

"Wal, I've a word ter say ter you, an'," his right hand falling upon his left wrist analytically, "my pulse is as reg'lar as a clock. I've b'en lookin' inter this case, an' hev interviewed all the folks I seen except one. Started for him, an' he slipped away like an eel. This was Red Knife, alias Adam, our esteemed untamable tame Injun. Later, I cornered him, too. It took money o' the realm ter open his mouth, but I had the coin—an' some whisky—an' Adam took 'em both in. He talked, an' this is w'ot he said in his gentle maow."

"He was abroad last night, Adam was, an' he seen one odd sarcumstance. He come onter some horses in the woods, an' sat down ter watch 'em. I suspect the egregious insex, as friend Yellowbird would say, was goin' ter steal 'em,

but he says contrary. An' then he seen two men bring a captyve gal along, an' they put her on one hoss; an' one o' the men mounted another an' they rode off; but the third man stayed behind."

"Now, this parable is simple when ye read it right. The captyve gal was Nell; the chap who went with her was a mean critter named Beck; an' him who stayed behind was Mister Steele Griffith, Esquire. Plain as A B C. Now, gal, you see the facts are out, an' I respectfully ask you ter tell what ye know. Maow! jest so. Will ye speak out?"

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE CAREER OF CRIME.

THE evening lights of Black Rock Bend were shining brightly, and none flared out more conspicuously than that in Steele Griffith's store. This light was the source of great irritation to two men.

They were lying upon the very top of the cliff which had originally given its name to the town—Black Rock. It was a prominent lookout, and from that top they could see the whole village. These men were Griffith and the assistant superintendent of the Mission, Joseph Maynard.

"Curse that fool of a Westcott!" muttered Griffith, for the twentieth time, "why don't he close up and go about his business? It seems that his perversity is a trick of the Old Nick, himself, to worry me. I wish I dared go there at once, and I am tempted to do it."

"Don't be rash," Maynard answered. "I wouldn't put my head into that village again, and I have less cause for fear than you; it is only a chance that they are aware that you got the gray powder of me. I don't believe they even suspect the fact, but I will take no risks. The safest way is to give the Bend a long farewell and skip—"

"Ha!" interrupted Griffith, "it's done at last!"

The light in the store had been extinguished, and he sprang to his feet in an exultant mood.

"Now for action!" he added. "Do you go to the thicket and get the horses ready, Joe. Have them untied and all ready, mind you, so that, if I am by any villainous chance pursued, I shall only have to leap upon my horse and gallop away. Do you understand?"

"Certainly and you will find me on hand. I hope no harm will come of your venture, but, as I told you before, it is running a great risk for you to enter the village. We don't know what discoveries they have made—"

"Hang them and their discoveries! I'll risk it all—I must. It's a choice between beggary and riches, so say no more. Come on!"

He led the way rapidly down the rock: they separated at its base; and then Steele went on alone to the village. He went directly to the store, and saw no suspicious sign by the way. Once there he unlocked the door and entered. No other person was inside.

He lighted the lamp and went at once to his desk. This was private property in the full sense of the word. There had never been but one key, and he trusted no one with it. His present errand was to get the map of the northern country; the chart which he believed was a sure guide to the spot where the Buried Treasure was to be found. He unlocked the desk and threw back the cover.

There were but few articles in the desk, and he had thought that he could lay his hand at once upon the map, but the first glance brought a startled look to his face. The map did not meet his gaze, and he knew that some one else had been there.

Hurriedly he searched for the coveted article, and then paused with a face white with anger and dismay. *The map was gone!* Yes; since noon, both the original chart and the imperfect copy he had made to show Beck, had disappeared.

One moment the arch-plotter stood dumfounded, and then his anger broke forth in words. Curses, loud and deep, fell rapidly, furiously from his lips. The blow was a terrible one. Menaced by great danger he had resolved to abandon all his interests at the Bend, trust to the Buried Treasure and flee from those who knew him too well; and now the clew to the gold was gone.

The violence of his anger soon passed. He did not look elsewhere for the map, for he felt sure that it had been taken away from the store. He was equally positive that Nat Westcott had taken no part in the theft, and, not knowing who the robber was, he did not think of searching in other places for the map. Suddenly he had a new idea.

"Hope is not yet gone!" he muttered, darkly. "Why didn't I think of it before? Beck and I have studied the imperfect copy together, and I have only to indicate the point to him orally and he will know where it is, at once. Ha! I am not beaten yet!"

Closing the desk with a bang, for he was too reckless to use caution, he extinguished the light and left the store. He had one more visit to make, and he looked toward his dwelling-house with an evil smile. Considering what was in his mind, it was a fiendish smile.

He was determined to leave the Bend in a way which would make his name a subject of remark

and story, there, for years to come, and the spirit of Cain was in his heart. Brother he had none, but there was one who was bound to him by a tie which should have been as sacred, and his thoughts were all of her.

With the paradoxical venom of crime he blamed his patient wife for his downfall, because, forsooth, but for her he would not have sinned and failed to win; and the demon in his heart was to be appeased only by the accomplishment of his projected crime.

He hastened toward the house.

When he arrived there he found that there was a light in the sitting-room, but none in his wife's chamber. A sneering smile crossed his face.

"The weak-minded fool is sitting up for me, worried beyond her powers of control! Good! I am glad she is, for I can gain access to her room, and I will leave her a memento of my affection which she will never forget while she lives!"

He moved around to the rear of the house and entered by the door at that point. Then he crept carefully up-stairs. He heard his wife's voice in the front room, but did not pause; he was anxious to do his work and get away. His mind was filled with such a variety of thoughts, which crowded one upon another, that he was in a state of confusion, and saw only what was apparent on the surface.

At that moment he did not remember that, before, when Marion sat up for him it had always been in her own room. Had he been calmer he might have suspected that her present companion was not Dorcas Strong.

Reaching Mrs. Griffith's room he struck a match. He did not think it prudent to light a lamp, for he wanted this visit to be secret. By the transient glow he saw the bottle of amber-hued medicine upon the table, and he smiled again and blew out the match.

He advanced to the table.

While on the summit of Black Rock he had separated from what was left of the gray powder a quantity which, according to Maynard's previous directions, he believed was just about right to cause death in a few hours. This he now intended to pour into the medicine, and end all at one sweep.

The poison was in a neatly-folded paper at the bottom of one of his pockets. Experiencing some difficulty in finding it, on account of other articles in the same pocket, he removed his handkerchief and the flask of whisky which he had secured to sustain him through the night.

Then he easily found the package of gray powder.

This done, he made a tunnel of one hand over the top of the bottle, and coolly poured in the powder. He could tell that it went down into the bottle as intended.

"Just as well as to have a light and betray myself," he muttered, as he shook the bottle well. "This time there will be no fooling, no inch-by-inch work. When Marion has drank this stuff she'll need no more medicine. She ought to thank me, but I haven't time to see her, and request it."

Smiling at what he fancied to be his witty remark, he replaced the handkerchief and the whisky-flask in his pocket and started down-stairs. It was his intention to retreat by the rear door, as silently as he had come in, but fate was against him.

Just as he reached the foot of the stairs the sitting-room door opened, light streamed out into the entry, and he stood face to face with his wife and Kansas Kitten.

Griffith came to a sudden stop, and the trio looked at each other in silent surprise. Even then the plotter was not proof against feelings of jealousy; he remembered that he had seen Mrs. Griffith and the Kitten together before, and the fact that the former was visiting Marion now aroused all his suspicions.

"Oh!" he cried, "so this is how you amuse yourself while I am away, is it, ma'am? You play the invalid when I am around, to avoid your share of gaining a livelihood, I dare say; and then entertain gallants in my my absence. By Judas Isariot! I admire your taste in the line of gallants!"

With a sneering smile he swept his gaze over Kansas Kitten, from head to foot, and then back again, his manner being superlatively insulting.

"Peace," answered the Kitten, in a deep, steady voice, in which there was no trace of his usual uncouthness. "Do not insult a lady whose face you are not worthy to gaze upon, and do not think to wound her with your taunts. She is not so ignorant of your real character as she has been."

"So," retorted Steele, scornfully. "And may I ask what rag-bag you are, who speaks for her?"

"You may, for you are soon to know, anyway. I am a United States detective!"

Griffith smiled contemptuously.

"You?"

"I!"

The two men looked each other full in the face. The usually dull face of the Kitten had somehow grown intelligent, and his large, gray eyes had a steady, powerful light.

"Your dress indicates it," retorted Steele.

"Judge me not by that, for detectives, like other men, often act an assumed role. I am what I say, and, more than that, I have a warrant for your arrest."

Griffith felt his confidence slipping away. This man who confronted him had assumed new dignity and force, and it was not hard to believe that he had been masquerading for some purpose. The schemer flashed a glance at his wife. She was very pale, and her face showed signs of weeping; and as she met his gaze she turned her face aside.

The act stirred his hot temper to the quick.

"Am I too horrible for you to look at?" he snarled.

"Yes," she faintly replied; "morally you are. I know you as you are at last. Oh! Steele, Steele! how could you?"

"By the fiends, this has gone far enough!" Griffith cried. "Scoundrel, who are you who has been telling lies about me?"

Steadily answered Kansas Kitten:

"I, who have told your wife that you are a murderer, am a detective, and I have a warrant for your arrest. Steele Griffith, you are my prisoner!"

He advanced a step, and a startled expression appeared on Steele's face. His hand moved toward his pocket, but, an instant later, Kansas Kitten had him covered with a glittering revolver.

"Stop!" the detective ordered. "Don't dare to try and draw a weapon, for I am not to be trifled with. Resistance will only make your case worse. In the name of the law, I call upon you to surrender!"

CHAPTER XXXII.

A BITTER DISAPPOINTMENT.

STEELE GRIFFITH'S breath came in short, quick gasps. He was thoroughly frightened at last, but by no means cowed. All he asked was an equal chance with this man, and then he would win or lose all at one stroke. He glanced toward the door, his eyes glittering fiercely.

"Don't try it!" cautioned Kansas Kitten; "you can't escape. I command you, yield!"

The detective moved forward, while Mrs. Griffith, pale as death, clung to the door and swayed to and fro as though the last atom of strength was deserting her.

Steele clinched his hands and breathed harder than ever. He was resolved not to surrender; if he must die, better do so in fighting his enemy than on the gallows. Desperate as the chance was, he was firm in the determination to resist arrest.

But there was a sudden change in the scene.

Some one brushed past Mrs. Griffith, and Steele had a momentary view of Dorcas Strong with a club upheld in her muscular hands; then the rude weapon descended upon Kansas Kitten's head, and he dropped to the floor and lay motionless.

A second fall came close upon the first, and Mrs. Griffith fainted in the doorway.

Dorcas secured the revolver which had fallen from the Kitten's nerveless grasp, while Steele laughed loudly and triumphantly.

"Bravo for you, Dorcas!" he cried. "You have knocked the senses out of this villain, and now I will finish the good work!"

He drew a knife, but Dorcas promptly turned the revolver upon him.

"No," she answered, in a firm, strident voice. "Keep back, Griffith! we'll have no bloodshed here. I have helped you out of your danger, but you mustn't presume on it. Let the man alone, and skip out while you can."

"But he is a detective."

"So I heard him say."

"Am I to give him a chance to run me down?"

"You'll be a fool if you let him catch you, but that is your lookout. As for me, I say—No bloodshed. I saved you; now be content, and go."

"But—"

Dorcas stamped her foot heavily upon the floor.

"There are no 'buts!'" she retorted. "Go away!"

Steele looked at her with sullen rage. The hand which held the revolver did not waver in the least, and he knew that she was as strong and hard-headed as a man.

"The detective will soon come to his senses," she added, "and if you are here then, I won't take your part. You had better get out of this!"

"Curse you! you are as much my enemy as my friend, but I will do as you say. If ever I see that scoundrel again I'll kill him, though."

He looked curiously at his wife.

"Did she faint for my sake, or his?" he muttered.

"Fool!" retorted Dorcas, "Why do you care to know the reason she fainted? If you had your way she'd be worse than in a faint, now."

The words aroused Griffith's instinct of self-preservation.

"I'll go," he abruptly replied. "Look your last on me, and—good-by!"

With reckless levity he kissed his hand to bony old Dorcas, and then strode toward the rear door, opened it and passed out into the

night. For one moment he thought of going to set fire to the house before he went, but as this blow, if successful, would probably destroy the amber-hued cordial, he abandoned the idea and hastened away. He soon reached the rendezvous and found Maynard waiting.

"What luck?" the latter asked.

"Famous!" was the harsh reply. "Everybody wins but me, and I am going to take my turn presently."

He mounted his horse, and they rode away.

"Have you the map?" Maynard inquired.

"No."

"How's that?"

"Some scoundrel has stolen it, and, now I think of it, I believe it was that accursed detective."

"What detective?"

"Never mind; I'll tell you later."

"But is the clue to the Buried Treasure lost?"

"Lost? No! I was a fool not to remember that I could work it without the map. All I need is Beck, and when we get to the hut we'll fix it with him. I'm going to have a swallow of whisky!"

He pulled his flask from his pocket, and drank long and heartily.

"I'm with you," responded Maynard, who thereupon drew his flask and followed the example of his comrade.

"You might have drank with me," said Griffith.

"I had a supply of my own, and it was just as well."

"Perhaps you are right, for I need all I can get, I am in a joyful mood, to-night, and it will take considerable fluid ruin to keep me moving."

"We've taken a bad tumble, Griffith."

"How so?"

"A few days ago we were good boys in the Bend, almost saints. Now we are fugitives, disgraced and hunted."

"And does that worry you?" Griffith demanded. "It don't me, not a grain; I've thrown off the mask, and now feel far better. You see, I've been scheming for years to get my wife's money. She has plenty of it in the East, and I thought to get it when I married her. I didn't, not by a blamed sight. Her old man was too fly; he sized me up for about my real worth and kept the ducats in quod. Then, when he died, he left a will which put the money in care of a sour old lawyer, and allowed Marion only a stated sum—a mere pittance—a year. All this was done to keep me from having a hack at the shiners."

"Now, the game I've been playing of late is this: My wife isn't long for this world—poor woman!—and my idea was to buy an infant somewhere call it mine, and present it to the Cerberus of a lawyer, to hold the wealth. That's why I came to this remote place, where it would not be so easy for the lawyer to learn whether a child had really been born to me and Marion."

"All this has fallen through, now, but if I can get the Buried Treasure I don't care. Give me wealth and Nell Stebbins, and I'll be happy as a lord. Darling Nell! I am impatient to get to the hut and see her!"

And Griffith took another deep draught of whisky.

"I hope it'll all come out well," said Maynard.

"It will; don't fear."

"Things are a bit squally all around the Bend."

"Never mind, old boy; we'll come out smiling."

Griffith was in boisterously exuberant spirits, and he talked loudly, drank copiously and, feeling the liquor somewhat, fell to boasting and telling stories of his past which were far from creditable. The polished gentleman of Black Rock Bend was transformed into a noisy braggart.

Maynard was by no means pleased. He drank liquor when he felt like it, but never to excess, and though a villain at heart, his most boisterous mood never passed the line of happy-go-lucky joviality. He was disgusted with Griffith but let him go on unchecked.

Finally Steele grew less talkative, and every minute found him saying less and less, until he finally relapsed into utter silence. This lasted until it suddenly occurred to Maynard that he might be stupidly drunk, and he broke the silence with a test question.

"Are you sleepy?"

"No; I'm sick!" sharply replied Griffith.

"You are? What's the trouble?"

"A most villainous pain in my stomach."

"Perhaps your whisky was bad."

"No, it was very good whisky. I don't know what has come over me, but the pain is infernal sharp. Never mind; we will be at the hut in half an hour, and I reckon the bad feeling will wear away."

He relapsed into silence, and as the matter seemed trifling to Maynard, it was not again referred to until some time later. In the mean while, they neared their destination, and Steele reined in his horse.

"The hut is just ahead," he said, in a low, thick voice. "Of course we mustn't approach too rashly, or we may get a bullet as a welcome."

Beck is wary, and I told him to guard Nell as he would his life."

The speaker sounded a whistle, but there was no answer.

He repeated it once—twice—thrice. Still no answer.

"Curse it!" Steele added, "they sleep like logs. We'll go forward, danger or no danger, for I am in such pain that life is a torment."

He rode quickly forward to the hut door, leaped from the saddle, and entered the rude structure. There was no challenge, no welcome, and the silence struck a chill to Griffith's blood.

"Strike a match!" he directed, hurriedly.

Maynard obeyed, and the light dimly revealed the interior of the hut. Then Griffith staggered back and dropped heavily upon a log evidently once used as a seat.

The place was vacant!

"What in the fiend's name does it mean?" he groaned.

"Wait! I saw a half-consumed torch. Give me time, and we'll have a light," Maynard promised.

Steele's head dropped heavily upon his hands. The pain that he suffered was so severe that it required all his fortitude to avoid groaning with every breath.

The torch was soon burning, and as the light rose brightly, Maynard suddenly uttered an exclamation.

"What's this?" he asked.

"What?" feebly inquired Steele, raising his head.

"Look at the sign on the wall."

Griffith obeyed. A sheet of brown paper had been fastened in a prominent place, and upon it was writing in a bold, rather symmetrical and legible hand. It was as follows:

"NOTICE!

"If Steele Griffith comes here to look for his fair bird, let him recall the old saying, 'Put not your trust in princes,' and change it to 'Put trust in no man.' The undersigned is very much obliged to S. G. for giving him so fair a companion on the trail, but he has an idea that he can dispose of her to better advantage than to let her and himself be at the disposal of said Griffith. Pardon me, dear sir, for playing you false, but it was very cruel in you to steal a charming young girl—and you an ancient fossil of forty years! The fair Nell is destined for another, younger lover.

"Your faithless servant,
"BECK."

Steele Griffith's pale face grew red with rage.

"The scoundrel!" he hissed; "I wish I had him here now. I'd shoot him as I would a dog! The villain has played me false, taken Nell, himself, and gone the devil only knows where!"

"He never wrote that notice," added Maynard. "Beck was no fool, but he hadn't education enough to spin off such a flowery, flippant notice as that."

"It don't matter," groaned Griffith. "Once let me see him again and I'll kill him at sight—and I'm going to have Nell, too. I'll devote my life to it—if this pain leaves me any. I am in torment. Bring in the blankets, and let me lie down."

Maynard obeyed, and a bed was soon arranged for the sick man. Maynard looked at him with a grave, thoughtful expression.

"I say, Steele, you have not swallowed any of the gray powder, have you?" he asked.

"Why do you ask?" returned Steele, with a start.

"Your symptoms—"

"I see, I see," Steele replied, as Maynard paused. "But I can't have swallowed any of it."

"Was your whisky tightly corked?"

"Yes; nothing could get into it. Great heavens! what pain I suffer! It couldn't have been the whisky, for—"

He paused suddenly, his face blanched whiter than ever, and he added in a husky whisper:

"My God! I poured the last dose of powder into the bottle of amber-hued medicine in the dark, and I had just taken my flask of whisky from my pocket and set it on the table. What if I put the poison in the wrong bottle?"

With feverish haste and trembling fingers he tore the empty flask from his pocket. It told no tales whatever, and Steele dropped back on the blankets.

"In heaven's name, do something for me!" he implored. "The pain is unbearable, and I am burning up. Maynard, oh! Maynard, I know I have swallowed the poison, and it is sure death!"

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE FIGHT OF THE FACTIONS.

YANK YELLOWBIRD chuckled quietly as he heard the crashing which betrayed the advance of the betrayed captain of the outlaws. That it was Boxshot he did not doubt, and the haste in which he and his followers came told of unusual excitement. Further words dropped by Pratt and Luke revealed the fact that, when the revolt took place, one of the band at the Refuge, who was true to the former leader, had escaped.

No doubt he had carried word to Boxshot, and the haste of the night-riders was explained.

"I consait thar will be some fun now," soliloquized the mountaineer. "Ef they try ter keep

Link Boxshot out o' thar, he'll rage like a tiger, an' a fight is sure ter foller. Now, ef he's like my uncle, twice removed, Joshua Yellowbird, he'd jest order the sun ter shine, so he cut back the enemy all ter pieces, but I don't b'lieve any o' these egregious varmint's hev the affluence with the weather-bureau necessary ter git the sun or moon hustled 'round ter order."

With a great clatter and crashing the horsemen swept through the woods until near the entrance to the robber home, and then Pratt's voice rung out loud and clear.

"Halt! who comes thar?" he called.

The horsemen promptly halted.

"I am Captain Boxshot," answered the giant's well-known voice.

"Don't know you," coolly returned the guard.

"Is that you, Pratt?"

"That's my name."

"We're comin' in," Boxshot added.

"No you ain't; this is a private way, an' thar ain't no passin'. Keep off! I have orders ter shoot whoever comes up ter my post, an' I'll do it!"

"You treacherous dog!" roared Boxshot, "would you dar' turn your rifle on your captain?"

"You ain't no cap'n o' mine. Pride Oliver reigns hyar, an' I obey him only."

"My curse upon Pride Oliver for a traitor, a scoundrel an' a coward!" shouted the giant outlaw.

"Pride Oliver is here to speak for himself!" said a clear voice from near the guard.

"Then let the cowardly cur make answer ter me. I've heerd that thar is a rebellion in the Refuge, an' that you lead it. By the fiends! you don't know what you hev done, boy. Do you s'pose I'll allow any man ter rob me of the lead o' my band? No; not though all the fiends of Purgatory stan' ready ter back him. I rule here, an' whoever opposes me, dies!"

"Keep cool, Mr. Boxshot," serenely advised Oliver. "You can scare nobody with your empty words; and when it comes to fighting, you know whether the Refuge is easy to capture. Better draw off, and leave boisterous howling to the wolves."

"Go it!" muttered Yank. "Wade in, both on ye, an' see which kin be the meanest. It's dog eat dog, an' ef they gnaw each other down ter the bone, it'll be a blessin' ter the country—it will, by hurley!"

"Pride Oliver, you are mad!" returned Boxshot.

"All right, Mr. Man."

"I give ye one more chance. Let us in, an' admit me as your leader, an' I'll forgive yer frolic; but ef you refuse, ev'ry man on ye dies!"

"Your terms of peace are declined. We have the Refuge, and we shall hold it; and if you, or your men, try to enter, singly or in a body, you will be shot down like wolves. This is my ultimatum, and all I have to say. Good-night! I am no longer here for idle words, but, if you attack us, you will find my whole force here with their rifles loaded to kill. Farewell!"

Boxshot spoke again, but no answer was returned. It was clear that Oliver meant what he said, and the old chief abandoned the unprofitable work of talking. He gave some command to his own men, however, which was not to be heard beyond their ranks.

The purport of what he said was soon evident.

The silence maintained by the mounted men was suddenly broken. The crashing of the bushes was renewed, and Boxshot's force swept impetuously forward. In one solid mass they dashed for the entrance to the robber lair.

Then another sound broke upon Yank's ears; a stern command from the gap; and the rocks rung with the discharge of rifles. The battle was fully begun. The rival factions yelled and cheered, and some cries of rage and pain were blended with the other sounds; but above all was heard Boxshot's powerful voice as he urged his men forward.

Gallantly they obeyed, but it was a fatal, unequal fight. Oliver's men were posted where they were shielded, and they could pour a deadly volley into the closely-massed assailants. They did this, and the leaden hail was too much for Boxshot's followers—they broke and fled, followed by the triumphant shouts of the victors.

Yank waited for no more. He did not believe that the assault would be renewed at that time; the assailants must have suffered severely, and they would take some other and safer, as well as surer, way of accomplishing their purpose. Probably nothing more would be done that night.

Speaking to Moses, the mountaineer moved carefully away. He wanted to consider the ways and means of entering the Refuge himself, and it had better be done before the Oliver faction was any more on the alert.

The wall of cliff arose darkly above the veteran, but he kept near its base and went on. It curved inwardly as he advanced, almost as sharply as the rim of a hoop, and he could see what its impassable front did to make the outlaw lair so secure.

Further on the wall ceased, but in its place

was an extremely wild, broken region, where a deep chasm barred the way effectually. One of these was a canyon two hundred yards long, one-half as wide, and so deep that a stone, which Yank dropped experimentally, was so long in striking the bottom that the mountaineer looked no further.

Great danger menaced the explorer at every step there, and he was convinced that investigations by night were by no means desirable. A plunge down some chasm would forever settle his share of the enterprise.

He proceeded to retrace his steps.

Arriving at the camp he found Laramie Luke and the Pathfinder awaiting with considerable anxiety. The firing at the gap had naturally aroused all their interest, though they had not felt any particular fear for their ally. So much firing could not have been caused by a battle against one man.

Yank briefly explained the situation.

"What bearing will the factional fight have upon our prospects?" Luke thoughtfully asked.

"It's hard ter say. The rumpus won't do the outlaws any good, fur they are bound ter bite an' scratch each other's eyes out, but whar we come in is another matter. In some way we want ter git inter the camp. How we're ter do it I can't say until I've looked the egregious place over by daylight, but one thing yu kin bet on. The Yellowbirds ain't ter be easily kep' down, an' though I am afflicted with the weak sister an' the atrocious newrology, it wouldn't s'prise me ef I managed ter hold up the fam'ly pedigree an' get at 'em, somehow."

"Thar must be some way of enterin', an' we'll find it," Powderfoot added.

"To be sure—to be sure."

Yank spoke very cheerfully, but did not see fit to remind the old borderer that if there was such an entrance, it would be carefully guarded while Link Boxshot and his men were about.

"We must take prompt action ter-morrow, an' not let Nell stay an hour longer than's necessary in that den o' human vipers," pursued Powderfoot.

"I consait so; we'll be up an' stirrin', an' I allow we'll make an egregious heap o' triberlation fur the insex. We'll clean 'em out root an' branch—specially root, fur I consait we shall hev ter work low down; in the bowels o' the 'arth, as 'twere. But we'll do it."

Yank nodded his head sharply, and then fell to stroking his beard as though all this was easy. He felt that it was necessary to keep up the Pathfinder's courage.

"Among all these chasms and crevices you mention, one ought to be found which leads to the lair," added Luke, in the same vein of encouragement.

"I consait so; an' it's odd what a small place we kin crawl through when we try. I once knowed a minister who was noted fur bein' egregious odd in his ways. He uster ride his sarkit on hoss-back, straddle o' an animyle as meek an' patient as Job. One day he rid up ter a house, chucked the rein over a hitchin'-post, 'thout tyin' it, an' went in ter give the sistern some p'int's about gettin' rid o' their besettin' sins."

"Fur once the patient old hoss got loose an' started slowly off, but the man of the house led him back ter the post, an' fu'st slippin' the end o' the rein through the hole in the post, looped it over the top as the parson had done. Pooty soon, out come the parson. Thar was the hoss fastened ter the post, but, as the parson looked clobber, he seen that the rein was passed through the hole, which wa'n't the way he left it."

"He paused, scratched his head, looked at the rein an' then at the hoss, an' then d'lib'rately observed:

"All things are possible with Providence, but how you managed ter crawl through that inch-hole I can't see!"

"All this is encouragin' ter us. Ef a hoss kin crawl through the hole of a hitchin'-post, we ought ter be able ter git inter Oliver's quarters."

There was always something infectious about the mountaineer's good-humor. It possessed qualities only to be understood when the infection of his voice and his various whimsical mannerisms, were heard and seen; and now he managed to put his companions in good humor.

None of them felt like keeping late hours, and, comparatively early, they lay down with no cover but their blankets and the darkness. Considering the danger about them the latter was as valuable as the former.

The night passed quietly.

When Luke and Powderfoot awoke in the morning, Yank and the dog were absent, but everything went to show that they had been gone but a short time. The other men had scarcely "shook themselves tergether," as Powderfoot expressed it, when the mountaineer reappeared, but he did not come alone. Luke and the Pathfinder looked in wonder, and then experienced new hope as they recognized Kansas Kitten, Nat Wescott, and Ishmael Lee.

"A party searching for Nell, I'll wager something," Luke exclaimed, laying his hand on the old borderer's arm.

Kansas Kitten swung his hat in excited greeting.

"Maow!" he ejaculated. "Hyar we be ag'in, an' I must say it's like a fairy tale. I'm a dogmatic feline, but I allow I didn't expect ter see ye hyar. Wal I should maow! Glad ter see ye, though, an' ef your pulses are as reg'lar as mine, we're bound ter make a first-class row among the heathen. Ma-yow-yow-yow!"

CHAPTER XXXIV.

SUBTERRANEAN EXPLORATIONS.

THE eccentric Kitten seemed to be in high spirits, but he kept his exuberant feeling within due bounds, and his distinctive cry was not uttered much above his usual tone of speaking.

"Reinforcements!" quoth Yank, nodding to Powderfoot. "I come enter them by chance an' enlisted them, an' I admit they signed the pay-roll prompt. They was out on the same errant which absorbs our attention."

"We're arter Nell," added the Kitten, more quietly.

"My poor Nell!" uttered the Pathfinder.

"Don't be an artom cast down; we'll hev her back safe. Wal, I should maow!"

"How did Oliver steal her from the Bend?"

"He didn't."

"No?"

"No. Yank an' I hev b'en comparin' notes, an', as nigh as we kin git at it, Oliver stole her from the man who first abductionized her. That man was Steele Griffith. Red Knife, the untamed tame Injun, saw him do it, an' thar is other proof. Yas; Griffith kidnapped her, but I reckon he run inter the outlaw gang, an' Oliver did his share o' stealin'. We three are on the trail. Others are out, but we preferr'd ter come alone. Ishmael hyar, knows the woods a bit, an' he has guided us, an' now we're ready fur work. Maow! ma-yow!"

With a sharp repetition of his cry, and a wave of his broad hand, Kansas Kitten indicated that he had said all he had to say, but Powderfoot had not. He did not comprehend the state of affairs at all, and he fairly deluged the Kitten with questions. If he had known how much the informant kept back of what he knew, he would hardly have been satisfied with what was told.

The party had breakfast together, during which an animated conversation was maintained. They now numbered six, and, as all were well armed, would be able to do considerable damage in case a fight was forced upon them. It was, however, their wish to avoid any such encounter, and, leaving the fighting to the rival factions of the outlaw band, rescue Nell quietly.

The more the outlaws fought among themselves, the better would be the rescuers' chances.

Breakfast finished, Yank led his party around to the north and found for them a secure hiding-place. Unless it became known that they were in the vicinity they had little to fear in the way of discovery. Then Yank prepared for another tour of investigation. It had been his intention to go alone, but Luke and Moses both requested permission—each in his natural way—to accompany the mountaineer, and the scouting party was thus formed.

Nevermiss was not long in deciding that fighting bad for a time been abandoned by the rival factions, and he now proceeded to get a view of the surrounding region. Leaving Luke and the dog, he went to an elevated point, climbed a tree and remained there for some time. Then he returned and made his report.

"Calm as a goat baskin' in the sun. You'd never think, Luke, that thar was so much rascality an' enmity afoot, but 'pearances ain't ter be trusted. My fust ancestor, Adam Yellowbird, was egregiously took in by 'pearances, an' he eat so many green apples that he got a condemned pain in his interior anatomy. Beats all natur' how much malevolence thar is in green fruit. The Yellowbirds are wiser now, an' I wouldn't eat none on't ef the pootiest woman I know on should beseech me. Still, I consait I hev b'en took in by women when I's younger. Once got engaged ter seven gals at one't, an' the way they did pester me was egregious!"

The mountaineer paused, stretched his arm out toward "The Refuge," and added:

"They've got a rayther cute den thar. It's a valley o' eight or ten acres, an' a good 'eal like a common village. They hev log-cabins, dogs, hens, cows an' folks; quite a thrivin' village, on the 'hull. I seen men movin' about, an' over in the woods I seen a fire I consait comes from Boxshot's camp. But I didn't see no entrance but the gap in the cliff, whar the guards set like hens on their aigs."

"Naturally, we can't expect there to be any other entrance easily seen," Luke replied.

"Jes' so; to be sure. Wal, as I s'pected, the big canyon an' the little chasms makes our approach at the rear out o' the question in the ordinary way. Thar are jest two ways fur us. Unless we kin find some way o' crossin' the chasms, we must climb yender the cliff."

He pointed to the natural wall.

"It would be a hard climb, Nevermiss."

"I know. Most folks would say that 'twas impossible, but I've found a good 'eal can be done by pluck an' muskle. Ef I wa'n't beset with newrology it would be a surer thing, but I mean ter try it, anyhow, ef other means fail."

"I am ready to make the effort, myself, but I should have no great amount of faith."

"We'll think on't anon. Fur now, come with me."

The mountaineer led the way toward the rear of the Refuge. Caution was used, but the fact that no guards were visible at that side of the inclosed space seemed to show that it was considered impassable and, also, to do away with the danger of discovery. A short survey of the big canyon was sufficient to convince both Yank and Luke that labor there would be thrown away; no human being could climb its high, steep walls. The next thing to be considered was the bewildering possibilities of the smaller chasms.

Yank went about the matter systematically, as far as he could, but nothing seemed to come of it. The chasms made a sort of labyrinth which could not be passed, and they were confusing in the extreme.

Two hours were passed in vain efforts, and then, finding themselves at the bottom of a gulch where they were free from observation, the men sat down to discuss the situation. Nearly half an hour was thus passed; then they arose to go, and it was noticed that Moses was invisible.

The gulch was nearly barren, a few stunted bushes at the base of the rocky sides being the only things to break the freedom of their view.

"It ain't like him to wander away," said the mountaineer, "but he seems ter have done it now. I consait we'll find him at the mouth o' this tunnel."

The speaker shouldered his rifle and was about to move away when one of the bushes by the rock quivered and Moses reappeared. His legs were completely wet to his body, and when he paused and gave himself a shake, water also flew from his sides and back.

"He's b'en explorin' on his own hook, but I consait he didn't find good ground."

"Hardly."

"Come on, dog; don't spend yer time sniffin' around thar. My interior department yearns fur dinner, an' I hate ter disapp'int it. Come on!"

Moses did not "come on." He hovered near the bushes, and, looking at his master, whined a protest to the proposed departure. Then he thrust his nose into the bushes.

"He objects to your plan," observed Luke.

"Yes. What's the creetur' got thar? Can't be no live animal, an' Moses ain't given to levity. I'll jest take a squint an' humor him."

So saying Yank parted the bushes and looked beyond. He could see a cleft in the place of the rock, a trifle smaller than an ordinary door. Moses, encouraged by this notice, walked into the cleft again and disappeared in the darkness.

"He wants you to follow," said Luke.

"Why should he?"

"I don't know."

"Nor I, by hurley! but I'm inclined ter go. It looks like child's play, but the hole leads toward the valley, an' I sorter want ter see what it's like. Will you foller, or stay hyar?"

"I follow where you lead."

"All right; come on!"

The mountaineer advanced briskly, but had gone only a few steps when he sunk to his knees in water. This brought from him a humorous complaint, but Moses was still in advance, and his master went on perseveringly. The passage gradually ascended, but the way was rough and progress slow. Every foot that they gained impressed the explorers strongly, but neither gave utterance to the hopes that were beginning to find place in their mind.

A low growl from Moses finally announced that he was still near, and Yank suddenly ran full upon him. The animal whined, moved restlessly and uttered another growl, and Yank, allowing his hand to drop on the shaggy head, found its owner with attention fixed in front.

"Hold up!" cautioned Nevermiss. "Thar may be more in this than we consait of. Hark, a bit!"

Both men stood perfectly still, and then Yank shook his head.

"Ef thar is anything ter be heard, his ears are sharper than mine. Use great care, lad, an' let us go forrard."

Once more they advanced. The passage now ascended at a gentle angle, and they were able to move without causing betraying sounds. Suddenly Luke detected a ray of light in advance, while, at the same moment, the mountaineer put back a restraining hand.

"Hol' on!" he cautioned. "Be still as a statoo, an' listen with all yer ears!"

The tall form of the borderman sunk to the ground, and he listened with the mobility of the statue he had mentioned. The sound of voices plainly reached his acute hearing, and distinct words and sentences floated upon the air.

"Rats desert a sinking ship," said the unknown speaker, "and I don't know why yu and I shouldn't be equally wise. I tell you that the band is doomed."

"That ain't certain," replied a second voice.

"How much does it lack of it? Boxshot and Oliver will hammer away at each other until one party is wiped out. By that time, what will be left of the other? When the fighting is over there will be no band, Beck, and it be-

hooves you to look out for Number One while you can."

"It seems mean in me ter go back on the boys."

"How is it with me? Griffith promised me a share in the Buried Treasure, but he will never get up from his bed again. The poison is doing its work slowly, but he is a doomed man all the same. Better for him if he had died quickly. I don't know why he didn't, but the liquor he drank may have prevented the usually-speedy work of the poison. Anyway, he was saved to suffer."

"I pity that poor devil; I ree'll do, Maynard."

"So do I, but we can't save him. If I believed in retributive justice, I should say it had overtaken him. But to business. Griffith is a doomed man and will never get the gold. In his occasional periods of mental aberration he has so revealed the place where the Buried Treasure is to be found that I, with the help of any one man who knows the woods, can get it. Now, I offer the chance to you, Beck. Let us desert all these folks, secure the treasure, and flee to safer regions."

There was a brief silence.

"It is good to be rich," added Maynard, suggestively.

"Enough!" Beck exclaimed. "For good or evil, I'm with you; to-night we quit the valley, forever. As I told you, I know a way out which is known ter no other human being, I believe. By this secret route we kin escape, and—you say the treasure is buried near hyar?"

"Not a mile away. If there were not so many of these infernal gulches and canyons, I could get it alone. As it is, your knowledge will supply the missing link."

"So be it; I give myself ter the scheme without reservation. Meet me hyar at nine o'clock, an' the work shall soon be done. Mornin' shall find us fur away. Now let us go back, or Oliver will get suspicious."

Footsteps were heard on the rocks, and then these, and all other sounds died away.

Yank Yellowbird raised his head.

"We have the atrocious insex on the hip, an' we owe the bulk o' the triumph ter Moses. That uncommon dog has scored another p'int, an' I'll be thrashed ef he ain't worthy o' high place in the temple o' fame. I'd give summut o' moment ter hev his pedigree, but it can't be did. I s'pose. It's a lost lick, like Noah Yellowbird's log. But come on, an' we'll see what sort o' a 'stablishment is beyond."

They went ten feet further, and then emerged into the outer world. They were on the inside of the line of chasms, and the outlaw valley lay just before them, now as easy of access as any place in the hills, while Maynard and Beck were to be seen walking toward the collection of cabins.

"I consait we've got 'em at last," Nevermiss added, "an' all we hev ter do is ter beat 'em at a game o' wits."

CHAPTER XXXV.

THE TREASURE-HUNTERS.

POWDERFOOT and his companions waited for the scouting-party to return with what patience they could master. Kansas Kitten, alone, was talkative, and, to all appearances, at his ease; but, even in his case, a shadow was now and then visible on his face, and he looked toward Ishmael Lee in a peculiar manner. The boy from Wildcat was very quiet, indeed; he never spoke unless addressed; but his eyes and ears saw and heard all. Nat Wescott felt himself out-classed in such company, and was disposed to be modest and still.

Kansas Kitten, however, made talk enough for all, and seemed never at loss for a subject.

The delay grew painful, but the tall form of the mountaineer was at last seen, and he and Laramie Luke came in followed by Moses.

"What o' Nell?" demanded the Pathfinder eagerly. "Tell me the news in a few words."

"We can't give no direck news o' her," Yank answered, "but we have reason ter b'lieve she's all right."

"Did ye see her?"

"No."

"Or hear her spoke of?"

"No; but the valley is quiet; an', what's more, we hev the key ter the egregious place. Hear our story!"

He told it all, briefly. When he spoke of the secret passage, Kansas Kitten glanced at Ishmael. A look of surprise was on the boy's face, but he said nothing. But the story had the effect of reviving Powderfoot's spirits, and his eyes gleamed with a light which made him look some years younger. He saw the possibilities open to them, and was wise enough not to expect rash action.

"We'll wait until dark," he said, an' then wrest my gal away from those demons. They won't look fur any trouble right in their midst, an' the chances will be all in our favor. I wish I was twenty year younger, but I'll wager somethin' we win, as 'tis."

"There are young, willing arms here, Pathfinder," replied Laramie Luke earnestly.

"An' brave hearts," Powderfoot answered, with a grateful glance at the young man. "I

know yer worth, young man, an' I thank ye heartily. But what is this about Steele Griffith bein' p'isoned an' dyin'?"

"I reckon I kin explain that," answered Kansas Kitten. "I happen ter know he has b'en tryin' ter p'isen another party, an' ef the signs are reliable, the man has got a dose of his own medicine. But thar is still another p'int. So Joe Maynard an' Beck are goin' ter gobble in the Buried Treasure?"

"Not much, they ain't!" declared Yank.

"What d'ye mean?"

"We'll dog 'em when they go, an' git it away. That gold b'longs ter a sartain young lady I know, an' the Yellowbird pedigree would hev a bad blot ef I let any egregious insex deprive her on't."

"Maow! that's biz. But I hev a better way."

"What's that?"

"Why not go an' git it ahead on 'em?"

"Should be happy ter do so, mister, but whar be we ter look? Thar has b'en some diggin' done fur that gold, as parties hyar present kin asseverate, but no gold has been found. Tell us whar Shor* buried it, an' we'll meander out an' git it."

Kansas Kitten drew a paper from his pocket, unfolded it, and spread it before the mountaineer. It was covered with peculiar lines and other characters.

"What's that?" asked the Kitten.

"Looks like a cat's-cradle, or a demoralized hammock," Yank replied.

"Be serious, Nevermiss, an' look wal."

"Should say 'twas a map o' these parts, an' I consait we are about thar," explained Yank, pointing. "Pathfinder, these woods is your old haunt; you kin beat me at rec'nizin' p'int, fur my foot never pressed this s'ile afore a few weeks ago."

"Powderfoot, do ye know that place?" continued the Kitten, indicating a certain point.

The old borderer looked steadily, and then suddenly started.

"It's a gulch not over a mile away," he answered, with some excitement, "an' by gracious, Yank, I b'lieve a stranger might fancy it looked like Dark Ravine."

"The Buried Treasure is thar," coolly added Kansas Kitten. "We have only to solve the figures you see, an' they must mean feet, yards or rods, I reckon."

"Whar did this map come from?"

"I stole it from Steele Griffith!" was the matter-of-fact reply. "I hev reason ter b'lieve it was drawn by Ralph Short when he buried the gold. Arterwards, when he died at Red Oak, he forgot the map, or it was neglected by them he left it with. It got among waste papers, floated 'round, an' finally fell inter Griffith's hands. He had clew enough ter know its value, but he couldn't locate the exact p'int whar the money was buried."

"An' you really think it ginerwine?" asked the Pathfinder, dubiously.

"I know it."

"I consait we kin rely on it," Yank added.

"Fur a man who ain't been around long, I allow Kansas Kitten has picked up a heap o' local items."

The speaker and Kansas Kitten exchanged glances, and the latter smiled gravely; he knew that many of his secrets were not secrets to Yank Yellowbird. The mountaineer stroked his sparse beard and eyed Ishmael thoughtfully. The boy seemed deeply interested in the map, but he said nothing.

A general discussion followed, and it was agreed that prompt measures should be taken to test the accuracy of the map. They decided to go to the indicated point two hours before dark, and then dig for the treasure which had for so many years been awaiting rediscovery.

The intervening time passed slowly, though Yank and the Kitten relieved the monotony of the occasion with cheerful conversation. The Kitten declared that his pulse wat as regular as ever, and that he was dogmatically confident of their ability to find the gold.

At the proper time they prepared for the venture.

"It reminds me o' the time I went treasure-huntin' when I's a boy," said the mountaineer, as he carefully reloaded his revolver. "'Twas said tha' a robber had buried gold in the hills a few hundred year afore, an' a chap with long hair an' wild eyes 'greed ter find it with a small pitchfork made o' witch-bazel. He enlisted my dad, my three brothers, Nehemiah, Powhattan an' Lazarus, an' me in the scheme. I was the youngest o' the lot, an' I was egregious skeered."

"Watch the stick," sez the feller. "It'll wobble when we git d'reckly over the gold," sez he.

"Why shall you wobble it?" sez I, seekin' fur information.

"I sha'n't," sez he, frownin'. "'Twill be the witches."

"Whar be the witches?" sez I.

"They're comin'," sez he.

"On broomsticks?" sez I.

"Yor hush up!" sez he.

"I shall holier like hurley ef they teches me," sez I.

"An' then we began ter meander 'round, the

feller holdin' out his divinity-rod, as he called it, so the witches could git hold on't easy, ter jerk it an' make it wobble. I held onter my dad's coat-tail, an' my teeth chattered so loud you'd thought thar was a hail storm. You see, I didn't keer ter hev no witches waltzin' around whar I was. But one witch finally skulked up, onseen by any on us, an' wobbled the stick; an' then my dad an' brother Nehemiah they fell ter diggin' with their spades like all creation. Three foot down they struck suthin'.

"It's the gold!" sez the magician, hoppin' around like pop-corn on a hot stove.

"Be you sure 'tain't a witch?" sez I, my teeth chatterin' so that I knocked out two on 'em.

"Silence, onregenerate onbeliever!" sez he, slingin' the forked stick at me. "Your skepticism is wicked," sez he.

"Oh, you ain't in danger," sez I, pertly; "witches hanker fur good little boys," sez I, "an' not homely insex like you!"

"Jest then my dad heaved up the treasure, an' by hurley, it wa'n't gold at all, but the bones o' a defunk sheep! The witches had wobbled the stick wrong, somehow, an' the gold never was got."

"I consait it won't be so this time. Be you all ready? Then come on. Sorry we ain't got no flags, drums an' bagpipes ter go at the head o' our army."

Yank was in unusually good spirits, and he and Powderfoot led the way to the gulch with long steps. Once there, it was decided that the starting-point was probably a huge boulder, and the figures on the map were consulted. The treasure-hunters had no means of measuring to a nice degree, but it was quickly discovered that if the figures were taken to mean yards, the place for digging would not lack much of falling at a crevice in the ground like that described by Short.

Luke and Nat began to dig zealously with the rude implements they had fashioned for the occasion, while Kansas Kitten, grown suddenly grave, looked around curiously.

Was it, indeed, in this wild place that Abraham Sherwin had been murdered long before? Had these frowning rocks rung with the reports of murderous rifles? Had the sand of the gulch been stained with life-blood, and was it here that Short, thinking, wrongly, that he was in Dark Ravine, buried the gold and the body of his slain partner?

"I want ter make a confession," said Powderfoot, in a low voice. "Many a day in past years I've passed lookin' fur the Buried Treasure, an', finally, I become convinced thar was one o' the murderers o' Sherwin an' Short nigh hyar. Of course he couldn't a-knowed o' the gold, or he'd got it, but it became my ambition ter find him. I tried, but couldn't git eye on him. Then come Yank, askin' fur my help. I'm ashamed ter say I was lukewarm fur awhile; I wanted the gold fur my gal ter fur Mary Sherwin. 'Twas sinful in me, I know, an' Nell noticed my slowness o' sympathy. Thar, the truth is out, an' I feel a heap better."

"Don't worry an' artom," the Kitten answered. "But who was this man you wanted ter find? What's his name?"

"Con Lanigan."

"Humph! I thought so."

"Hev you heerd ov him?"

"I hev, an' I've tried ter find him, too, but late news satisfies me thar ain't no need o' my worryin' about him. Hal' what's up now?"

Ishmael Lee had clasped his hands dramatically.

"The gold!" he gasped; "thank Heaven, the gold is found!"

He reeled back like one faint and ill, but the other men crowded forward. Luke and Nat had ceased work, and at their feet lay the coveted "Buried Treasure." The canvas bags of former days had decayed, but not the gold. There it lay in a heap, a wealth of nuggets, and finer "dust," which would have made a professional miner wild with joy.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

IN THE OUTLAWS' VALLEY.

THE gold was at the camp. The men had conveyed it to their hiding-place with the same secrecy with which it had been secured, and even Yank found a fascination in gazing upon it. There was no denying that it was a rare sight. There was no nugget which bade fair to eclipse the record of the American mines, in size, but the most remarkable thing was the number of really large and splendid nuggets. No wonder, with such lumps around them, Sherwin and Short had been able to accumulate a large fortune.

At last the Buried Treasure had been recovered, but it was not yet conveyed to a place of safety, and the men knew not what dangers might yet meet them.

The night bade fair to be an exciting one.

Nat's watch was closely observed to see that no error of time was made, and at the proper moment the entire party set out. They were soon at the bottom of the gulch into which the secret entrance opened. They had decided to remain quiet until Maynard and Beck went out, and then go quickly about their work.

Laramie Luke had come to wonder greatly at

the inactivity of Boxshot and his men. They had been in a fever, the previous evening, to retake the Refuge without delay, and now the whole day had passed without any movement on their part. Yank had made a brief scout; enough to show that the Boxshot faction were encamped near the entrance; but this did not explain their seeming apathy. Luke brought up the matter again while they awaited, and Yank did not hesitate to give the opinion that their apathy would be broken before morning. Just how the deposed leader would strike nobody pretended to know, but it was agreed that the sooner they got away from the place misnamed "The Refuge," the better.

Kansas Kitten came to Yank while they waited.

"Mountaineer," he said, "ef thar is anything ye want ter know about the village, Ishmael Lee might tell ye."

"What do I want ter know?"

"Wouldn't it be an advantage ter know how things are arranged? Thar are sart'in houses. Nell may be in, an' others where she ain't likely ter be."

"To be sure. An' the boy kin tell me this?"

"Yes."

"How did he git the information?" asked Yank, as quietly as ever.

"He has b'en in the valley before."

The mountaineer laughed lightly.

"I consait so. I've had my opinion o' the boy fur some time, an' sence he j'ined us in this expedition I'd hev kept a sharp eye on him, only fur the break in the outlaw gang an' the change it has made in our war ag'in 'em."

"I feel sure that Ishmael is ter be trusted."

"Do you know him wal?"

"No; but what I've seen on him has b'en ter his credit."

"It won't do any harm ter question him, but let me say a word to you in private. It may be wal fur you ter keep an eye on Ishmael when we git inter the valley. Mind, I don't say his heart ain't with us, fur I consait it may be; but we're workin' fur Nell now, an' it won't do fur us ter shut our eyes, trust everybody—specially sech as the boy—an' toddle along in lamb-like confidence that all will come out right. I ain't ag'in the boy, but I am for Nell."

"Sartain, sartain. I understand, Nevermiss, an' it does you credit. Lord forbid I should cause ye ter be rash. I don't ask ye ter trust the boy as ye would an old frien', but I think he's all right, an' he kin give ye p'int on the town."

"Send the eccentric young man hyar, ef ye will."

Ishmael came, and was duly interviewed concerning the outlaw village. Link Boxshot himself could not have described it with more readiness; whether the description was correct was another matter. If correct, Yank knew the location of all the buildings when the conversation was past.

The boy said that, besides Nell, there were but two women in the place, both of whom were well advanced in years. The men, as a rule, occupied cabins at the rate of four to each building. Then there was Boxshot's house, that of Pride Oliver, and the "council-house" and hospital. The position of each was duly indicated by Ishmael.

He and Yank had just finished talking when there was a new diversion. Two men emerged from the secret passage into the gulch. They carried a spade and pick as well as rifles, and, without making any pause, moved away toward the east.

They were the deserters, Beck and Maynard, and the hour had come for the other party of adventurers to enter the valley. They did not make useless delay, but started.

The peculiar passage was found to be in its former condition. They went on through, and soon stood on the inside rim of the gulch, with the outlaw camp spread out just below them. It was at that moment a peaceful-looking scene; no law-abiding village could have surpassed it in this respect. The various lights twinkled brightly, and silence was over all.

Yank turned to his followers.

"You may all stay hyar but Luke," he said. "We two will do a bit o' scoutin', an' then call on you, or not, as circumstances seem ter require. Powderfoot, keep the dog with ye; I consait he'd better stay back."

No one disputed the wisdom of his plans, and the reserve party took place in a retired niche of rock. Then Yank and Luke again advanced. The night was favorable to their undertaking, with heavy clouds piled up against the sky to such a degree that it would be hard for an outlaw to recognize the fact that strangers were about, unless they met face to face.

The mountaineer kept his mind on the building which had been indicated as Pride Oliver's quarters. Their course took them near the "hospital," so called, and signs of life there caused them to pause for a moment. Window-glass the cabin had none, but it was not necessary to break the wild breeze of the summer evening. There was no obstruction, and Yank peered inside.

There was one man in the hospital, and the mountaineer at once recognized Steele Griffith.

It was not the Griffith of Black Rock Bend, however. Bodily affliction had gone hard with the man; he had wasted away greatly; his thin face was flushed with fever; and the glassy gleam of his eyes would not have encouraged a regular physician.

Retribution had fallen heavily upon Steele Griffith. He had schemed to do a most iniquitous deed; it had recoiled upon himself; and he was dying a death which would have aroused the pity of his worst enemy.

Yank was content with a brief survey; he turned aside and uttered no word of comment. Luke was silent, but he could not forget that it was to this man that Nell owed her first rough experience as a captive. He, at least, would not profit by his villainy.

Oliver's house was soon reached. Here they found their view obstructed, for the absence of window-glass was made partially good by an ingenious substitute of lattice-work, much like the window-blinds of civilization. The adventurers tried to turn them, so as to get the desired view, but failed.

"Thar's lights inside," observed Yank.

"Yes. No doubt, there are human beings, too."

"Which prob'ly includes Nell."

The mountaineer paused, stroked his beard, and added:

"I consait it won't do fur us ter stan' hyar like posts, when any minute may see the quiet o' this village turned upside down; I've got tef go in. You may stay hyar, an' be guided by circumstances."

"Be careful, Nevermiss; there may be deadly danger inside."

"To be sure. A man with a left foot that is a coward can't wal be ign'rant o' the fack; the weak sister an' the egregious newrolgy are stirrin' me up powerful; but I've see'd skeery times afore. Thar was the triberlation at Medicine Springs; an' the Mormon 'sperience when Gold Gauntlet was workin' his odd game; an' the Duke o' Dakota's tame-Injun scheme; an' Gladiador Gabe's fight; an' several more I could name. I consait I shall come out all right, an' with due credit ter the Yellowbird pedigree."

Despite his cheerful words, the speaker looked around with some anxiety. They were in the heart of the village; the sounds arising from the smaller cabins showed that Oliver's men were there, too; and discovery might at any moment meet the scouts.

Yank repeated his directions, and then glided away. As the windows were impassable, there was but one means of entrance, and that the door. The mountaineer must boldly enter a house where he had reason to believe deadly enemies were to be found.

Laramie Luke held his rifle ready for action, and stood on the alert. The moment that Yank disappeared he felt that he had a far better plan, and that their whole force ought to be summoned, but it was too late.

The years of experience the young man had passed on the southeastern plains had inured him to scenes like this, but he could not command the old coolness. Thoughts of Nell seriously troubled him. He had gained deep interest in the fair-haired daughter of old Powderfoot, and the tender passion weakens men, unless the occasion be the last extremity, when men fight for those they love like a lioness for her young.

Anxiously Luke awaited. His hearing was strained to catch the slightest sound, but none came; the cabin might have been a tomb for all he could hear. The silence was painful, and he felt a presentiment that it would be rudely broken. He looked around sharply, expecting to see an outlaw appear at any moment.

Suddenly he swung around toward the house. What was that? There had been a shock—a jar—as though some heavy object had fallen. More than that, there was a continued disturbance in the place, and it grew louder as Luke listened.

He knew how to account for it, and waited no longer. Gliding to the door, he hastily entered, his rifle held ready for use, but the front room was vacant. The disturbance proceeded from the room at the rear, and he flung aside the blanket which served as a door.

There was no light there, but that from the front room revealed a peculiar scene. Yank had found the enemy, and they had found him; he was grappled in a desperate struggle with two stout outlaws. They were doing their best to overpower him, while his efforts were all directed to an attempt to prevent an alarm.

The mountaineer's prowess was well illustrated then; both men would outweigh him, yet, with great strength and skill, he was fighting both at once and holding his own.

Laramie Luke took in the situation at a glance, and acted with equal celerity. Springing forward, he struck the nearer outlaw with his clubbed rifle, and the man went down in a heap. Up went Luke's weapon again, but it was not needed. Quick as a flash Yank swung the second man around, laid him upon his back, and then deliberately sat down astride his person.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

THE STORM BREAKS FORTH.

YANK YELLOWBIRD flashed his knife before

the man's eyes, and scowled until his humorous face grew as much like a desperado's as it could be made.

"Lay still, you egregious insex!" he commanded. "Lay still, or I'll be obleeged ter do some desp'rit work. I'd jest as soon 'light on ye as not—I would, by hurley! I was born with antipathies, an' they will stick to me. I hate all mean skunks, an' I know you're one on 'em. Don't ye dar' screech, or I'll give ye somethin' ter yell for!"

"Let me alone!" gasped the man; "I yield!"

"Hello!" quoth the mountaineer, "I consait we ain't among strangers. Luke, this is Sime Lawson, the creetur' who came ter our camp as Boxshot's spy."

"I recognize him."

"Simon, we're right glad ter see ye, an' now we want ye ter make yerself useful. Whar is Nell Stebbins?"

Promptly answered the outlaw:

"In Boxshot's cabin."

"Why is she thar?"

"Oliver put her thar."

"Whar is Oliver?"

"I reckon he's thar, too, jest now."

"All right; thank ye, hearty, Simon. Luke, you see that rope over thar? Bring it hyar, ef ye will, an' we'll reduce our frien' ter a passive state. You won't holler, Simon?"

"I've see'd you afore, Yank Yellowbird," sullenly answered Lawson, "an' I ain't goin' ter make a fool o' myself. Tie me up ef ye want ter; as long ez you do me no bod'ly harm, I ain't goin' ter make a row. I know enough ter look out fur Sime Lawson an' his hide."

"Hoss sense, that. Your wisdom reminds me o' my great-great gran'father, Solomon Yellowbird, whom I'd tell ye about ef I had time. The strings, Luke!"

In a very short time Lawson was bound and gagged, and then the second outlaw, who was insensible, was served in a like manner. One step was gained, and Yank only paused to state that he and the men had had a meeting which left no choice for him, but compelled him to fight or have the alarm given; and then he led the way from the house.

"They moved toward Boxshot's cabin without delay, but only a few steps had been taken when they saw several persons leave the building and move away. The garments of a woman were easily distinguishable among them, but the dim light did not suffice to show who she was."

Yank and Luke pressed forward, but the journey soon ended; the larger party entered the "hospital." The intruders hastened to reach position at one of the windows, and the first glance showed them that they were one step nearer the accomplishment of their purpose.

Nell Stebbins was there.

The Pathfinder's daughter was paler than usual, but it was clear that courage had not deserted her. Her manner did not partake of defiance, but there was a quiet confidence about it which told of a spirit as yet unquelled.

Her friends readily realized why she had been brought there. Oliver was not present, but the three men who had her in charge were his followers. Clearly, she was there for an interview with the miserable man who had wrecked his own life through an unreciprocated fancy for her. Yet Steele Griffith was not looking at her then; his face was covered with his hands. He slowly removed them.

"Nell, I am dying," he said, in a hoarse voice.

"That is bad for you," the girl slowly replied.

"Is that all you have to say?"

"What should I say?"

"Have you no words of sympathy?"

Nell hesitated for a moment, and then firmly answered:

"I don't know why I should have. Death is a serious—a terrible thing; but I cannot forget what I know of you. I remember Marion!"

"I have sinned," Griffith faintly continued, "but you know why I did it. It was all because I loved you!"

Nell's face flushed.

"You say that you are dying," she exclaimed, "and, if it is so, I should think you might have enough regard for common decency to choose a different subject of conversation."

"Don't think that I still cherish hope, for I don't; my bride be the grave. But, Nell, I have Oliver's permission to see you, and I want to say one word now. I hope that this night will be my last, and my sufferings soon be over. Blame me all you will; call me a villain if you must; but let me say that which I want you to remember when I am gone to the 'dust and ashes' of which I've heard somebody tell. Villain that I was, I cared for you sincerely; I respected, admired and revered you; I wish you all the good in the world."

"I remember," Nell returned, "that, on the night you kidnapped me, you boasted that you had loved a score of women as well as you loved me. Loved me!—Heaven save the mark!"

Griffith's face flushed a deeper red than the fever-hue.

"My sins hem me in at every turn!" he muttered. "Well, have it so. My experience on this bed has softened me, but you will not be-

lieve it, I dare say. There isn't one comfort for me; I am even obliged to accept the care of a man I hate. Beck proved false to me, and, when Oliver came to the hut where I vainly supposed you would be kept for me, the Judas act was soon consummated. Oliver left a written notice which was an insult added to injury, and now I have to put up with his care. Well, possibly I ought to be glad that his men stumbled upon the hut where I lay slowly dying from the effects of the poison, and brought me here, but I am out of patience with every one. I believe I hate even you, Nell. Go away!"

With this irritable order he pulled the blanket over his face, but there was a sudden, light spring; a man crossed the floor; and the blanket was pulled away.

"Do you hate me, Steele Griffith?" asked a cool voice.

The dying man stared in blank wonder. There stood Kansas Kitten, his arms folded across his broad breast, and his strong, steady gaze bent upon Griffith. New light appeared in the latter's eyes.

"You, here?" he cried.

"As you see," was the cool reply.

"By Heaven, you shall not all escape my vengeance!" Griffith wildly exclaimed. "Men, that fellow is a detective, in disguise. Shoot him down, or he will bring ruin to you all!"

"Hold up, ye egregious varmint!" quickly cried a commanding voice. "If thar is any shootin' ter be did, we're the ones ter do it. Surrender, or we'll make an atrocious triberlation among ye—we will, by hurley!"

And then Yank and Laramie Luke marched into the room, their rifles bearing upon Oliver's men.

"Silence, ev'ry man!" Nevermiss sternly continued. "Ef you screech, or try ter run away, you are dead men!"

"Maow!" Kansas Kitten added; "that's about the size on't. We're hyar on biz, an' we rule or ruin!"

"By the fiends!" exclaimed one of the outlaws, "this is Yank Yellowbird or the devil, himself. I've seen him before."

He did not make clear to whom the last sentence referred, but as the man was Pickett, the fellow with whom Luke had a personal encounter in the bushes the night the treasure-hunters changed camps, it was not hard to understand him.

"Rally!" Griffith cried, raising his wasted form partially in bed. "Will you let yourselves be frightened by these men? Summon your comrades, and the tide will soon turn in your favor."

"It'll be a red tide, if they try it!" retorted Kansas Kitten. "Death to him who resists—we are not so placed that we will use gloved hands. We rule or ruin! Griffith, there is yet one thing for you to know about me. You say that I am a detective. Do you know my name?"

"No."

"Blind dolt! If I was to cast off my disguise you would know me well. I am Warren Locke!"

Griffith started, and then a fierce imprecation passed his quivering lips.

"I know you too well," he added.

"We were acquaintances in the old days, but I don't imagine there was much love between us."

"No!" furiously replied the dying man; "your love was all for some one else. I know now why you came to Black Rock Bend. My wife—"

"Peace!" commanded Kansas Kitten. "Do not add another falsehood to the long list laid up against you. You do not know why I came to the Bend, but I will tell you now. I came to arrest you for the murder of Abraham Sherwin, father of Mary!"

The arch-plotter turned pale, and he dropped heavily back on his couch.

"You have run a long career of crime," the detective went on, relentlessly, "but it is about over now. You were only a boy when you had your violent fancy for Mary Sherwin's mother, but you were born a scoundrel. Even when the unhappy woman married Sherwin you did not abandon hope, and you sought to win through crime. Sherwin was gold-digging with a man named Short; you gathered a few trusty ruffians about you and murdered the two men as they were returning with a fortune in their possession. Somehow, you did not suspect the existence of the gold, and, buried by Short, it became the 'Buried Treasure' of later days. You returned East, and so heard nothing about the gold for long years, I dare say; and when you did hear of it, it was not easy to locate the scene of the tragedy, as you were only there once."

"Such is my theory; you can give the facts or not; it don't matter. I know you went East, hoping to win the wife of your victim, but Mrs. Sherwin's death foiled you. They say that murder will out, and this case proves it well. Nobody ever suspected that you killed Sherwin until, a few weeks ago, one of your hired assassins made a confession on his death-bed. Then I, being a detective, was sent here to arrest you. It is strange, Steele Griffith, that Warren Locke was the man selected for the work."

The dying man put his hands to his head in a dazed way, but, just then, the cabin shook as though struck by a cyclone, and a deep roar broke upon the air.

Every one in the cabin started, but, before anything could be said, another roar followed. And fast on its heels sounded a third and a fourth, the whole almost combined, and the cabin rattled and trembled more violently than ever.

"Is it an 'arthquake?" gasped one of the outlaws.

"No, you fool!" sharply replied his nearest comrade, "Link Boxshot has made another attack!"

The same explanation had occurred to Yank and his allies, but *how* had the deposed chief attacked? No rifle ever made a sound like those which had burst upon the air.

"Bombs!" cried Kansas Kitten. "Explosives of some sort, and I'll bet on it. We'd better get out of this."

Laramie Luke sprung to Nell's side, but at that moment Pride Oliver appeared in the doorway.

"Rally, men!" he cried, hoarsely. "Boxshot has attacked us, and he seems to be using the devil's own weapons. Rally, and follow me!"

Suddenly a new expression flashed to the speaker's face. He recognized Yank, and stood like one dumfounded.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

THE FINAL STRUGGLE.

THE air trembled with new sounds, and the crack of rifles, the cheers of men and terrified shouts were to be heard. But the outlaw lieutenant thought only of the scene before him.

"Yank Yellowbird!" he ejaculated. "We are betrayed!"

"Go an' hustle your fightin'-critters around," quickly replied Nevermiss. "We ain't in the fuss, nor at all inclined ter be. Go ter battle ef ye wish, or Boxshot will chaw ye all ter pieces."

"My first work is to be done here!"

The outlaw threw up his rifle, but it was not discharged. With a panther-like leap Yank gained his side and the rifle was dashed from his grasp. Then the veteran's strong hands found suitable hold, his muscles were strained for the effort, and he flung Oliver headlong out of the door.

"Go it, ye atrocious insex!" Yank exclaimed. "I'd capture the creetur, but he is needed in the fight. We want the rival factions ter chaw each other all ter pieces, an' both needs a leader. Come on, folks! Land o' Goshen! ain't Link Boxshot makin' it lively!"

Another deep roar followed, and, as Yank reached the door, earth and gravel were thrown in a shower over his person. He looked back at Nell in a troubled way, but Luke had thrown a shawl over her head, and his arm was at her disposal. Perhaps it was to hold the shawl that the aforesaid arm had been passed around her waist.

"I consait we'll hev ter run like hurley," continued the mountaineer. "The skrimmage is waxin' warm."

They emerged from the cabin, and one glance was enough to verify Yank's last words. The fighting was actually among the cabins; in some way Boxshot's men had carried the gap, driven Oliver's guard back, and were now pressing them hard in the very heart of the village. The crack of rifles was now less frequent than the sound of revolvers, and the struggle was becoming hand-to-hand. Boxshot's voice arose above all other sounds, cheering on his men.

Oliver had accepted his rough treatment at Yank's hands without remonstrance. When he arose he saw at a glance how desperate was the situation, and that his presence was imperatively necessary elsewhere.

If Boxshot won the day, he would show no mercy to the man who had traitorously usurped his place.

So Oliver had bounded to the head of his dismayed followers, and was trying to stem the tide of defeat. His efforts were enough to make him worthy of consideration from fickle fortune, but he could not plant his men firmly enough to check the assailants.

"Now fur a run!" said Yank, in his coolest manner. "The bullets are flyin' egregiously thick, but we must run an' dodge. I've seen the time I could dodge a bullet seven times out o' six, but the newrolgy—"

The remainder of the sentence was lost to his companions as they made their rush. Yank led the way, and Luke and Kansas Kitten brought up the rear, shielding Nell from chance shots as much as possible. If a little time was vouchsafed them, they would leave immediate danger behind.

But it was not so to be.

They had nearly passed the scattered cabins when they came suddenly upon six or seven men. Who they were could not be told, but their manner was not such as to leave doubt as to how they should be received. With threatening yells they dashed headlong at the rescue party, and a revolver-shot cut through Yank's sleeve.

"Down with them!" shouted one of the party.

The mountaineer struck a leveled revolver aside and beat down the would-be assassin with his clubbed rifle.

"Down with yerselves!" he retorted. "Guess ye don't know the Yellowbird pedigree, do ye? I'm an egregious pestilence that won't be put down! I'm an onmitigated onpleasantness that is bad fur the stomach! I'm a combination o' sea-sickness an' sky-attic roomatiz! I'm bad medicine ter take, but ye've got ter take me!"

All the while he was shouting these extravagant boasts, which sounded so strange on his modest lips, he was using his rifle with remarkable effect. Those who were opposed to him had a chance then to see how Yank Yellowbird fought, and they never wanted another illustration.

Luke and Kansas Kitten were with him, shoulder to shoulder, and they presented an iron wall to the assaults of the enemy. The first detachment was no match for the heroic trio, and the latter would soon have been free but for a new turn of the tide. Oliver's men were being steadily driven back, and the central part of the fight soon became around Yank and his friends; they were in the vortex of the whirlpool of battle.

From this unpleasant position they found it hard to escape, but they met the outlaws of both factions bravely and tried to break the line. Then it was that Kansas Kitten developed new lung power, and a series of characteristic screeches went soaring on the air.

"Maow! Ma-yow-yow-yow! Wake up an' come at us! We're hungry ter see ye! Wade in an' show yer blood! Ma-yow-yow-YOW!"

Almost ear-splitting were his "cat-calls," but they had one good result. A new figure suddenly appeared upon the scene—an old man of almost gigantic figure, over whose shoulders floated long, white hair. It was Powderfoot, the Pathfinder, and he plunged into the fight as though forty years had been lifted from his head. At his side was Nat Westcott, and Moses kept them company.

But the fight had run its course. One moment all was strife; the next, not a man seemed to have any desire for fighting. A few of Oliver's men were in retreat, but Oliver himself lay lifeless upon the ground with Link Boxshot standing over him.

The big outlaw was pointing to Yank and his party.

"Let them alone!" gasped Boxshot. "The man who strikes another blow makes me his enemy."

And then he reeled and, like a forest tree, fell heavily to the ground.

A sharp cry followed, and Ishmael Lee sprung forward and dropped on his knees by the side of the stricken chief. He seized the huge hands, and, pressing them in his, dropped tears upon them. Boxshot looked up dully; he was as weak then as the boy from Wildcat.

"She is his wife!" murmured Kansas Kitten.

Yank nodded quietly, but the revelation was a surprise to some who heard. The peculiarities of the self-styled boy were, however, explained by that terse sentence. The boy became a memory of the past, and the mourner seemed more true to life as Link Boxshot's wife than as Ishmael.

The fallen chief feebly motioned them to approach.

"My war ag'in' you is over," he said, faintly. "I'm a dyin' man, an' I seen you fight ag'in' Oliver's men. Whar be my followers?—my eyes are dim."

"I'm hyar, cap'n" answered a voice.

"Who be you?"

"Dan Weeks."

"Good! You're a loyal man. Do ye hear me? It is my last command that Yank Yellowbird an' his frien's go free."

"I hear, an' it shall be as you say, cap'n. Besides, thar ain't many o' the band left, an' I reckon Yellowbird an' his friends would give us a hard pull ef we tackled 'em."

Boxshot turned to Pride Oliver's body. "Take the traitor away!" he ordered; "I can't die nigh him. He ruined the band, but when we used the hidden bombs, we cleaned his gang out quick. Margaret!"

He turned to his weeping wife.

"Yes," she tremulously answered.

"Don't shed a tear fur me; I ain't worth it. You was a good-hearted woman, an' I kep' ye in a life o' crime. You'll soon be free, now, an' I hope you'll have peace. I want ye ter go ter her that is of your own blood. Gents' my wife is aunt ter Mary Sherwin, an' I want ye ter care fur them when I'm gone."

"He speaks the truth," said Kansas Kitten, to Laramie Luke. "Mrs. Boxshot was the younger sister of Mary's mother. When she married Boxshot they drifted away, and Margaret, shocked at the life which was hers, never made an effort to communicate with her relatives. A little while ago Boxshot sent her to the Bend as a spy, disguised as Ishmael Lee, and she met Mary and helped. She also worried Griffith, disguised as the man 'Hague.'"

"You seem well informed, Detective Locke," dryly observed Luke.

"I have picked up some items of news. It was I who listened at Powderfoot's window, one night, and troubled you all. I was after news. My trail is ended, and from this time Kansas Kitten disappears from history. I will help carry the Buried Treasure to the Bend, and then turn my face toward the East."

"You've done wal, sir," said Yank Yellowbird; "you've done very wal; you've done most mighty wal, by hurley! As Kansas Kitten you was a noble feline, ef you was dogmatic, an' I hope yer pulse will hold reg'lar. You remind me o' my great-uncle, Ham Yellowbird, who had the chronic hydrofoby an' barked reg'lar fur nigh onter twenty years. His bark wa'n't on the sea, but you could hear it any time. The Yellowbirds most all hev pecooliarities. I've got 'em, folks say, an' I've got the newrolgy, too, I consait. I hope Moses won't ketch it."

The mountaineer leveled his index finger at the dog, which had taken position near him, and gravely added:

"Wickedness only prospers fur a season. Moses, thar, was the objick o' brutal usage among these folks, an' now he's back as conqueror. I notice that most egregious insex sooner or later come ter grief, an' I'm glad on't. The Yellowbirds never did take to evil-doers, unless they had a sharp stick an' could make a heap o' triberlations for 'em."

The story is told, and it only remains to glance at the after-lives of those who figured therein.

Link Boxshot died and was buried in the valley, from which the surviving outlaws went away forever. Oliver and Steele Griffith—the latter of whom was found dead at the end of the fight—were given to the earth in the forest. Maynard and Beck disappeared and were seen no more. Justice deserved at least one of them, but, disappointed in finding the Buried Treasure, they went their way, wherever it was.

The Mission still flourishes under the care of the Brandreths, but Nell and Mary are no longer teachers.

Mary, Mrs. Boxshot, Marion Griffith, Warren Locke and Nat Westcott went East together, taking the "Buried Treasure" with them. There is only good news of them. Mary is now Westcott's wife, and the widow of the outlaw captain is with them, passing her last days peacefully.

Before the party left the Bend it was made known that Locke and Griffith had once been rival suitors for Marion's hand. Unfortunately, she chose Griffith; but it came to pass that, when the dark clouds rolled away, Marion fully regained her health, and at the end of two years she became the wife of Locke, *alias* Kansas Kitten. And happiness was at last hers.

In one of the largest towns of Dakota lives Laramie Luke; his wife, Nell, and Powderfoot, the Pathfinder. The latter is now an octogenarian, but he is a wonderfully well-preserved old man, and it is still his delight to tell of the campaign when Luke Winchester won the fair Nell's love by his heroic efforts in her behalf.

Of Dorcas Strong, Sime Lawson, Red Knife and other minor characters, there is no record after the drama closed at Black Rock Bend.

At that time, too, our other characters separated from Yank Yellowbird. The mountaineer intended to spend the winter further north, and, accompanied only by Moses and his horse, he quietly went his way. His history is known best to the mountains, prairies and rivers he loved so well.

THE END.

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